

**CHANGES IN LANGUAGE POLICY IN ESTONIA:
SELF-DESCRIPTIONS OF RUSSIAN-SPEAKING STUDENTS**

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Abstract: This study concentrates on one of the most drastic changes in Estonian language policy since the country regained its independence – the change in the language of instruction in Russian-medium schools. The Estonian example is rather unique internationally since the minority group can choose different languages of instruction for schooling. We focus on students' ethno-cultural self-descriptions as one indicator for studying the change in the language of instruction. We use the online interview method as an empirical basis; the sample consists of graduates from upper-secondary schools/classes with various languages of instruction (Estonian, Russian, language immersion) situated in various regions of Estonia (monolingual vs bilingual everyday setting; n = 14). The results of the analysis reveal the relationships between ethno-cultural self-descriptions and attitudes to the changes in the language of instruction. The ethno-cultural self-descriptions in turn are expressed in terms of general social affiliation (media habits, future plans and affiliation with Estonia). We conclude that the transition to Estonian-language instruction has failed in terms of communication, since a focus on instrumental rather than ethno-cultural issues can lead to the weak social affiliation of individual students.

Keywords: language policy, ethno-cultural self-description, language of instruction, educational change, Russian-speaking population of Estonia, qualitative online interview method

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1. Introduction

This article concentrates on analysing an example of changes in language policy – the change in the language of instruction – in what is internationally a rather unique education system. The distinctiveness of the Estonian education system is that there are many different educational models with different languages of instruction available to one of the country's language minority groups.

Language is a topical issue in Estonia among the public generally and is one of the main differentiating factors between national groups in the country. Studies (Vihalemm et al. 2011) indicate that while command of the official language among the Russian-speaking population of Estonia is related to subjective quality of life (that is, to people's assessments of their coping with life and satisfaction with it), in the other Baltic states, differences are perceived as arising primarily from ethnic affiliations instead of the official language. In Estonia, command of the official language has been valued from different perspectives. On the one hand, a good command of Estonian facilitates – and a poor command hinders – success in various cycles of lifespan, and great importance is ascribed to language skills by both the majority and minority national groups. On the other hand, Estonian has been highlighted in public discourse as a vital element of national identity (Masso et al. 2013).

The general principles and aims of language policy have remained constant since Estonia regained its independence; there have only been minor changes regarding the demands of language skills. At the same time, the education system in Estonia, including Russian-medium education, has changed continuously in recent decades. One of the most significant innovations in education in recent years has been the gradual transition to Estonian-language instruction in upper secondary schools where the language of instruction used to be Russian. Although these changes are happening within the education system, the aims of this innovation are clearly related to language policy. Previous analyses have hypothesised that Estonia's minority policy has failed due to the 'ideological-managerial' framework used to design policy instruments and the lack of alternatives related to 'culture' instead of ideology (Aidarov and Drechsler 2013). Our study is built on a similar cultural premise – that language policy is not just a top-down process led by public institutions, but shaped via the communicative process between the public and related individuals. We concentrate on analysing a short period of change in language policy: the transition to Estonian-language instruction, and the interpretations of these changes by individual students.

The results of previous studies show that the implementation of innovation in education is a complex process the success of which depends on many different aspects (Fullan 2006, Hargreaves 2005). As in other fields, in the education system the process of reform is influenced by how the main target groups comprehend the innovation. The less they believe that an innovation will improve something; the more it conflicts with their values and experience; the more complex it is; and the less positive evidence there is of it, the more negative their position towards the innovation will be (Rogers 2003). Changes in languages of instruction have been controversially perceived in different countries (Salomone 2010), and therefore the Estonian experience could make a valuable contribution to understanding the factors that could have an impact on the implementation of educational innovations and that could be interpreted differently by different groups. According to previous studies, public messages related to education reforms in Estonia have focused on pedagogical preparedness rather than the relationships

between the language of instruction and ethno-cultural identity (see e.g. Masso and Kello 2012, Masso et al. 2013). Therefore, the Russian-language population of Estonia may perceive activities targeted at developing Estonian language skills – for example, the transition to instruction in Estonian – as pressure and a risk to their mother tongue and ethnic identity (Vihalemm 2011, Tallinna noorte 2006). Other studies have analysed the value attached to Russian as a mother tongue (Pavelson and Jedomskihh 1998); concerns about losing command of Russian due to the transition to instruction in Estonian (Vihalemm 1999); and the self-determination strategies of the Russian-language population in general (Masso and Vihalemm 2003, 2007, Masso and Tender 2007). Also, international studies (Murtagh et al. 2012) have indicated that changes affecting one's self-identification and status may give rise to opposition.

The aforementioned studies concentrated first and foremost on instrumental issues related to the change in the language of instruction, like knowledge of Estonian. However, some studies (Masso and Soll 2014, Masso et al. 2013) have indicated that the guarantee of success of language policy changes is inherently communicative. But there are very few studies concentrating on the role of the communicative process in the implementation of language policy and the ethno-cultural self-descriptions of Russian-speaking students in the context of change in the language of instruction (see e.g. Masso and Soll 2014). This article focuses on the perception of the main language policy change in Estonia – the transition to Estonian-language instruction in Russian-medium schools – by analysing the ethno-cultural self-descriptions of individual students. We aim to answer the following research questions: (1) How are changes in the language of instruction perceived among groups describing themselves through various ethno-cultural affiliations? (2) How are these individual self-descriptions related to the perception of their social affiliation?

2. Principles and changes in language policy

2.1. Principles of language policy

At the most general level the main principles of language policy are stated in the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia (1991), resulting in a vision of Estonia as a nation state with one state language and stipulating the preservation and development of the Estonian language as one of the most important tasks of all inhabitants and institutions. Although in the public sphere and in official communication Estonian is seen as the main tool for achieving social cohesion horizontally and vertically in society, different mother tongues are still valued and accepted, and there is a right to acquire and use these for personal aims. In detail, language use and language management are described in various laws and legislation (e.g. the Keeleseadus). Restoration of Estonian independence led to changes in language policy, and this has had an impact on different spheres of social life. The education system plays an important role in the preservation and

development of language: primary and lower secondary education are considered particularly important in terms of the development of language skills and knowledge. However, from the point of view of social cohesion – which is more related to knowledge about society – secondary education is considered most essential (Siiner 2012). One task of the education system is to ensure the cultural reproduction of society through the development of students' knowledge and skills, including language skills and knowledge and the sharing of cultural values and traditions. However, the education system can be seen as a mirror of society: education reforms and innovations are a response to the changed situation, and the implementation of reforms should support people's ability to cope with new demands in society.

The language policy objectives set in 1989 also remain in place today in general terms (Keeleseadus 2011). The biggest change is related to the status and use of Russian due to the historical and political context and Estonia's national status (Valge 2014). At the level of practical language use, linguistic choices (Siiner 2012) and attitudes (Vihalemm 2008, 2011), several changes have occurred. The most significant changes in relation to the education system are the following: learning Estonian is compulsory for all students, starting as early as kindergarten; and at the level of higher education (university) the language of instruction is mainly Estonian, with options for studying in Russian decreasing. Moreover, the quality of language teaching has improved through the use of diverse methods (e.g. immersion) and there are more – and different kinds of – opportunities (e.g. additional non-formal language learning). The level of proficiency in Estonian among non-native speakers is growing and the percentage of people who consider knowledge of the language to be necessary has increased (Vihalemm 2008, 2011). The results of previous studies show that attitudes, frequency of language use, level of proficiency and satisfaction with career choices and life in general in Estonia vary significantly among the Russian-speaking population. Also, attitudes to changes in society (Lauristin 2011), including education innovations like attitudes to the change in the language of instruction (Masso et al. 2012), vary significantly. For this reason, different interpretations and attitudes should be taken into consideration when implementing education and language policies.

2.2. Changes in language policy

Various changes implemented in the education system can be directly attributed to language policy objectives. For example, levels of proficiency in different languages are set as learning objectives in national curricula; the minimum number of lessons in Estonian (and other languages) is also stipulated in national curricula. On the basis of the increased number of lessons and earlier start (in kindergarten), the changes in the language of instruction were established at the level of higher education but also upper secondary school. Although in the latter bilingual studies (40% Russian, 60% Estonian) were planned, in official texts (legislation) and the media the 60:40 model is presented as Estonian-medium studies. According to the

action plan compiled by the Ministry of Education and Research (Vene... 2007) this should be a step-by-step process in which every year at least one more subject is taught in Estonian. Schools and school owners have been responsible for implementing the transition. As a supportive measure, teacher training has been organised at the state level; the compilation of study materials and the implementation of the language immersion programme can be seen as supportive measures. At the same time, the voluntary nature of the language immersion programmes was stressed, for both families and educational institutions.

Earlier studies (Masso, Kello 2010, 2012) indicate that the success of implementing changes in language policy depends not only on the availability and quality of practical help (e.g. teacher training and instructional materials) but to a large extent also on the mutual understanding reached between stakeholders (the ministry and concerned parties). However, according to previous research such consensual understanding is absent. For example, an expert survey among local government officials, researchers and others (Masso et al. 2012) indicates that stakeholders in the transition assess the goals and process of the educational change differently depending on their cultural and other experiences¹. Also, the attitudes of stakeholders may develop in interaction with one another and multiple mediums. For instance, the results of a previous study revealed the mutual influence of attitudes between students and teachers: teachers' active participation in in-service training and their positive attitudes to the transition to Estonian-language teaching are significant supportive factors in explaining students' attitudes to change in the language of instruction (Masso and Soll 2014).

Different opinions and attitudes can partly be the result of variance in media consumption. Previous studies confirm that ethnic groups act in linguistically different media spaces (Salvet 2012, Setina 2008). Representation of the transition in the media mainly focuses on pedagogical and organisational problems; less attention has been paid to the interests and identities of certain social groups (Masso 2010, Masso and Kello 2012) despite the change in language of instruction being seen as risking the loss of ethnic identity among Russians (Kirss and Viהלem 2008, Saar 2008).

Earlier research has concluded that in addition to the abovementioned aspects of media coverage and consumption, the communication and reception/interpretation of messages concerning the transition to Estonian-language tuition can also be considered problematic. The results of previous studies (Masso et al. 2012) show that when communicating the aims of changing the language of instruction the focus has mostly been on instrumental reasoning, such as improving students' command of Estonian and their competitive ability for entering Estonian universities. Explanations related to ethno-cultural self-identification and identity have rarely been discussed (EMOR 2008, Masso et al. 2013). Only a handful of studies have analysed the significance of the change in the language of instruction in the context

¹ The growing preference for Estonian-language higher education serves as proof of a certain increase in the willingness to study in Estonian (Lauristin et al. 2012); also, demand for Estonian-language nursery schools can be perceived (Masso et al. 2012).

of ethno-cultural identity (Masso et al. 2013). For instance, a study conducted in Estonia (Masso et al. 2013) demonstrated that students whose mother tongue is Russian and who study bilingually or in Estonian are exposed on a daily basis to a diversity of socio-linguistic experiences that express a connection to Estonian society. Another study (Masso and Soll 2014) indicates that shaping an identity independently from the daily socio-linguistic experience can be due to the variety of stakeholders associated with educational changes and the complexity of communicating the related changes. However, the ethno-cultural self-descriptions of students studying in Russian-language secondary schools have not been analysed in the context of educational change – and the goal of this paper is to fill this gap.

3. Communication of ethno-cultural identity

In this article we use the concept of ethno-cultural identity as a central indicator for studying the change in the language of instruction and the ways students have perceived these changes. According to the sociological understanding, ethno-cultural identity refers to group affiliation and the emotional significance ascribed to such belonging (Tajfel 2010, Turner 2010). In this paper we take as our starting point principles (Isajiw 1992, Roberts et al. 1999, Tajfel 2010, Turner 2010) that see ethno-cultural identity as a communicative process following from the interaction of internal and external components. This interaction process consists of both micro- and macro-level communication: first (like direct model-behaviour and face-to-face conversations) influencing the construction of identity through acceptance of certain roles or shaping group preferences; and secondly where the communication of cultural norms and values is occurring. We are guided by the premise (Vignoles et al. 2011) that the effects of macro-level communication will be realised through activities at the micro-level. These activities mostly include those within the family (e.g. conversations with children, spending time together and exercising certain ways of behaving) or within the formal education system (Giampapa 2001, Hughes et al. 2006, Kim and Chao 2009, Salomone 2010), the latter being the main focus of this study.

When analysing the internalisation of language policy principles through ethno-cultural identity, the communication theory approach of Niklas Luhmann (2004) is used in this paper. Luhmann defines communication as a process combining information (e.g. subjects taught), utterance (German: *Mitteilung*, e.g. teaching methods) and understanding (e.g. application of knowledge). According to Luhmann, similarly to other approaches (see e.g. Tillmann 2006) communication within the education system aims to prepare students for successful functioning in society; the successfulness of the communication is measured by means of formal examination, which in turn influences the career choices of students. According to Luhmann (2004), unsuccessful communication may be inevitable because students/teachers differ as to their communication experiences. Also, empirical studies (Vanderstraeten 2004) demonstrate that schools establish explicit

control over the allocation of students, rooms, lesson periods, curricular units and so forth, but not over the details of the daily interaction between teachers and students.

In situations of educational change, the ways in which students have so far been prepared for successful functioning in society should be revised. However, educational innovations like change in the language of instruction are not always commonly accepted by the main associated groups, as various studies (Ehala 2007, 2009, Liebkind 2010, Littlejohn and Foss 2011) indicate. One reason could be that language is one of the main markers of ethnic identity (Abrams 1990, Fought 2006, Giles 1976, Luring 2008, Verkuyten 2005), especially in Estonia, among Estonians and Russians alike (Vihalemm 2011). The importance of language to an ethnic group may increase in situations where the pressure of assimilation – or a change in the status of the group to which one belongs or in the spoken language – is perceived (Liebkind 1999, Schmidt 2008). Language can also turn out to be the most essential characteristic of the ethnic group as a reflection of the values of other ethnic groups, for example in situations where the language is an essential distinguishing factor for the majority group; the dividing line between ‘us’ and ‘them’, as in Estonia (Vihalemm et al. 2011).

According to Luhmann (2004) there are various times when communication within the education system can fail, i.e. the system is unable to guarantee the students’ successful functioning in society. We assume that in the case of the change in the language of instruction in Estonia signs of both successful and unsuccessful communication can be seen. (1) The most critical issue here is that the change in the language of instruction may not be commonly accepted in society at large. The opinions expressed by Estonia’s Russian-speaking population regarding changes in education may differ significantly from the official discourse: the loss of the opportunity to study in the mother tongue could be perceived as a danger to ethnic identity, knowledge of the mother tongue and group status in general. Different understandings can also be caused from the pedagogical point of view: educational change tends to be associated with negative effects on the knowledge and skills of students. Various understandings could influence the positions of students, but these could also affect the implementation process of educational change. (2) Secondly, not all educational innovations accord with the understandings of teachers, who are key persons in implementing educational change according to several studies (Fullan 2006, Hargraves 2005). An example of the failed communication of a teacher could be if he or she does not choose information or a means of presenting it that is understandable to and feasible for students (at the same time following official curricula). (3) Thirdly, failed communication can also arise from students if new knowledge is at variance with previous knowledge and attitudes (for example in learning about Estonian history; see e.g. Kello 2014) or there is no motivation to acquire new knowledge (e.g. Estonian, if the student plans to live outside of Estonia). In this article we concentrate mostly on analysing how students perceive educational changes and the change in the language of instruction.

In summary, we understand ethno-cultural identity as an outcome of internal and external communication processes, not as an innate trait. Empirical studies confirm that ethno-cultural identities may be internalised through various mediums, originating from both formal sources (e.g. school and the language of instruction) and informal references (family and peers) (Hughes et al. 2006, Kim and Park 2007, Kim et al. 2009, Schwartz 2007, Tillmann 2006). In this article we assume that analysis of ethno-cultural self-descriptions is an effective tool for studying internalisation and expressions of external language policy implementation. As such, ethno-cultural identity can be understood herein as a means of communication (e.g. attitudes towards educational change can be expressed on the basis of constructed identity). Ethno-cultural identity may also function as an aim of communication (e.g. assuming that strong ethno-cultural identity leads to successful functioning in society). Thus, we analyse the relationships between ethno-cultural self-descriptions and attitudes to educational innovations, on the one hand, and relationships with social systems in general (e.g. internal and external identification references like the media and social affiliation) as one expression of ethno-cultural identity.

4. Method and data

The empirical basis for the article was formed from data gathered by conducting synchronous online interviews in writing (Salmons 2010) in autumn 2012. Unlike earlier quantitative approaches (Soll 2012), such interviews provide a more detailed understanding of the role of the language of instruction in the construction of identity among youth. In the context of this study, the advantages of the online method in comparison with interviews are as follows: it makes it possible to gather data from different geographical regions; it minimises the effect of the conductor of the interview in the course thereof (e.g. in terms of language use, nationality and age); and data processing requires less time, as there is no need for time-consuming transcription. In analysing the gathered data, certain shortcomings of the method must be taken into account, such as the limited spontaneity of responses (e.g. strictly adhering to the rules of capitalisation), perceived aloofness in communication (e.g. some interviewees including their full name and photo, following the example of the person conducting the interview) and the superficiality of some responses (e.g. using up time presenting responses in writing).

The sample includes Russian-speaking graduates of upper-secondary school ($n = 14$) from different regions in Estonia (Tallinn: 4; Tartu: 5; Ida-Viru County: 5) who receive instruction in different languages at school/in their class (Estonian, Russian or language immersion). Focusing on students in their final year of upper secondary school made it possible to concentrate on their language learning experience at different levels of education, the construction of identity over a longer period of time and the interaction of various socialisation references.

According to the principles of strategic sampling (Trost 1986), the group to be studied is homogenous as to their period of schooling (graduating in the 2012/2013 academic year); and the heterogeneity of responses is ensured by the interviewees' study experience in schools with different languages of instruction (Estonian, Estonian and Russian or language immersion), their living in regions of varying ethnic composition (Estonian- and Russian-speaking Tallinn, predominantly Estonian-speaking Tartu and predominantly Russian-speaking Ida-Viru County) and their different socio-demographic background (6 males, 8 females). To select the interviewees, the contact information provided by the schools and the snowball sampling method were used.

The interview plan included the following generic subjects: school and language of instruction (e.g. language of instruction, school choices and opinions about those being taught in different languages); self-identification; domestic cultural traditions; media; and future plans. The core of the study – the patterns of constructing ethno-cultural identity – was analysed by means of a question requiring a spontaneous response (i.e. to the question “Who do you identify with?”) as well as via interpretations of identifying categories and associative projective techniques employed in earlier quantitative studies (cf. Masso et al. 2003, 2007) and qualitative studies (Masso 2002). Interviews were conducted in Estonian (3) or Russian (11) depending on the interviewees' preferences. The results were analysed by applying the thematic analysis method (Dey 2005) with elements of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 2008) as well as manual analysis and analysis using Maxqda software (Kelle 1995). The initial stage of thematic or horizontal analysis included mapping the key subjects covered in the interviews. The identification of subjects was first done using ‘manual’ or open coding; thematic text coding was then done with the help of software. The second stage of analysis focused on the interrelations of prominent key categories in the text. The objective was to establish explanations arising from the languages of instruction and characterising self-identification strategies, instead of the formal mapping of conceptual relations (cf. e.g. Lewins and Silver 2007). Although the questions of the interview plan were partly based on the results of earlier quantitative studies (Soll 2012) and theoretical approaches to identity (Verkuyten 2005), the primary analytical categories were formed from inductive development, while comparisons with earlier studies were formed in the final analysis stage.

The article presents the results in two parts: firstly, an overview of the self-identification strategies that emerged from the analysis; and secondly, focusing on the role of the formal education system and the language of instruction, as well as references external to the education system in the construction of ethno-cultural identity. The following analysis illustrates generalisations by the conductors of the interviews with quotes from the interviews; reference keys consist of a multi-component code (for example, F = female, M = male, li = language immersion, est = Estonian as the language of instruction, rus = Estonian and Russian as the languages of instruction). To ensure the anonymity of the interviewees, the names of schools indicated in quotes are replaced with asterisks (**).

5. Ethno-cultural self-descriptions

According to the analysis, the interviewees identified themselves through a certain combination of references. In terms of ethno-cultural self-descriptions the interviews indicated two major thematic dimensions, which were used by the students to illustrate their ethno-cultural affiliation: namely, ethno-cultural practices; and emotional-cognitive confidence.

Ethno-cultural practices are discussions on ethnic affiliation and cultural activities related to it. Students touched upon these subjects in their spontaneous identification, answering the question “Who do you identify with?”, or in their self-identification across pre-determined identifying categories. In this respect, two main lines of reasoning were followed: firstly, students viewed themselves explicitly as representatives of a certain ethnic group, whether Estonian or Russian; and secondly, it was pointed out that in addition to the official ethnic affiliation, the cognitive meaning ascribed to affiliation is also of great importance.

Students identified themselves as members of an ethnic group, first and foremost, when criteria based on personal attitudes about affiliation were met. For example, among the prerequisites for ethnic identification were language skills and place of birth as well as cultural and family ties. Where these prerequisites were only partly fulfilled, the interviewees were more likely to identify themselves on the basis of official attributes (e.g. citizenship and name), socio-demographic attributes (e.g. gender) or attributes characterising their field of activity (e.g. student).

Besides ethno-cultural practices, self-identification varied within the **emotional-cognitive confidence** dimension, or the terms in which ethnic affiliations were spoken of. Confidence or insecurity manifested in linguistic structures (mood and punctuation) and the content of statements (e.g. saying that identifying their ethnic affiliation was complicated). Being confident of one’s ethnic identity is characterised by the use of the indicative mood and a lack of hesitation. Conversely, insecurity was indicated by the use of the conditional mood and certain punctuation marks (question marks and ellipses), references to factors complicating self-identification or the making of conflicting statements during the interview.

These two dimensions of self-identification – ethno-cultural practices and emotional-cognitive confidence – are not mutually exclusive, but rather quintessentially related. Hence, the aforementioned insecurity-inducing contradiction could be due to the fact that the prerequisites for ethnic affiliation were only partly met. Moreover, earlier studies have indicated a connection between confidence or insecurity and the prerequisites for belonging to a certain ethnic group (e.g. mother tongue, language of communication or country of birth) (Verkuyten 2006). Nevertheless, interviewees who are insecure about their ethnic identity can prefer other aspects of social identity in their self-description, thus overcoming the contradiction. Analysis of combining these two self-identification dimensions revealed three primary self-description strategies: **confident identity with a strong Russian focus**; **insecure Estonian-Russian identity**; and **alternative identity**.

There were some similarities and differences in ethno-cultural group descriptions between students who used different identification strategies. Some students who expressed a **confident Russian identity** used linguistic arguments to describe both Estonians and Russians. Proficiency in Estonian was seen as a prerequisite for being Estonian; and a command of Russian (and sometimes also Estonian) was related to being Russian in Estonia (Kohtla-Järve_est_M, Kohtla_Järve_rus_F2). However, not all interviewees with a confident Russian identity highlighted such linguistic aspects of these ethno-cultural categories, and some even emphasised that language proficiency is not a condition that has to be fulfilled in order to identify with Estonians or Russians (Tartu_li_M). For example:

Russians in Estonia – people whose mother tongue is Russian; they may speak Estonian, but they communicate mainly in Russian (Kohtla-Järve_est_M).

Estonians – Estonians by nationality. It does not matter what language they speak (Tartu_li_M).

[To be a Russian in Estonia means] communicating in Russian as a native speaker... but also speaking the national language (Kohtla-Järve_rus_F2).

Some of the students with a Russian identity considered an emotional and conservative relationship between an ethnic group and a specific culture to be an important aspect of their ethno-cultural affiliation. It was believed that Estonians felt the need to protect Estonian language and culture (Tartu_li_M); and Russians had to protect Russian language and culture, as well as to follow certain traditions, for example celebrating holidays. Nonetheless, when the interviewees with a Russian identity discussed the significance of Russian language and culture, they expressed ethnic pride and the necessity of valuing the linguistic and cultural aspects of being Russian (Tartu_rus_N1). Ethnic pride was not evident when the same interviewees described the relation between Estonians and Estonian culture. The students provided different interpretations of the cultural relationship between Russians in Estonia and Russians in Russia. For instance, some students felt that being Russian in Estonia rather means an orientation towards culture and media in Russia, but others said that it also requires knowledge of Estonian culture. Some interviewees mentioned the cultural superiority of Russians in Estonia over Russians in Russia (Kohtla-Järve_rus_F2), while others argued that there is no difference between Russians wherever they live. For example:

I understand that it is necessary [for Estonians] to keep a small nation together, to protect language and culture (Tartu_li_M).

To be Russian means being proud of being a Russian-speaking person /.../ (Tartu_rus_F1).

It is not good to compare people, but for some reason it seems to me that Russians who grow up in Estonia are often more cultured, think more freely than Russians in Russia (Kohtla_Järve_rus_F2).

In most interviews, the students with a Russian identity described power relations between Estonians and other ethnic groups in Estonia in which the dominant position was ascribed to Estonians. For example, Estonia was defined as

the property of Estonians, and Estonians were called the ‘masters’ and ‘rulers’ of Estonia (Tallinn_li_M). Furthermore, Estonians were believed to have better opportunities on the labour market than Russians, and the civic rights of Estonians were also considered to be broader. The rights of Russians were described as more limited, and the need to fight for one’s rights was mentioned as a characteristic of Russians in Estonia (Tartu_rus_F1). In some cases it was argued that the term ‘Russian in Estonia’ in and of itself implied that Russians were outsiders (Tartu_rus_F2). For example:

Estonians – the ‘masters’ of the state, its rulers (Tallinn_li_M).

To be Russian in Estonia today means fighting for your rights all the time (Tartu_rus_F1).

‘Russians in Estonia’ makes it sound as if they’re strangers who are Russian-speaking and live in Estonia (Tartu_rus_F2).

Some interviewees who expressed a **hybrid Estonian-Russian identity** mentioned, similarly to their Russian-identifying peers, that language proficiency is an essential aspect of ethno-cultural categories: for instance, speaking Estonian as a mother tongue being a key characteristic of Estonians (Tallinn_rus_M). Some also described the power relations between Estonians and Russians in Estonia: for example, comfort and well-being were believed to describe the life of Estonians, which may implicitly indicate that, based on the students’ understanding, other ethnic groups have a weaker position in society. In some interviews the students also said that the rights of Russians were limited in Estonia (Tallinn_rus_M). Differently from students with a Russian identity, several interviewees with an Estonian-Russian identity were rather negative towards both Estonians and Russians (Kohtla-Järve_est_F, Tartu_est_M). This deserves attention because, at the same time, they themselves identified with both of these ethno-cultural categories. For example:

Estonians – /.../people who speak Estonian as their mother tongue. /.../ Russians in Estonia – 30% of the population whose rights are unfortunately often limited (Tallinn_rus_M).

[Estonians are] boring, monotonous, annoying. /.../ [Russians in Estonia are] cruel, brutal, animated (Kohtla-Järve_est_F).

[Estonians –] jerk. /.../ [Russians in Estonia –] even bigger jerk (Tartu_est_M).

Command of language and power relations were also discussed in the context of ethno-cultural categories in the interviews of students with an **alternative identity**, although a little differently compared to the interviews with their peers with a Russian or Estonian-Russian identity. For example, one interviewee (Kohtla-Järve_rus_F1) said that Estonians had an advantage on the labour market over other ethnic groups in Estonia; however, this was not because of being Estonian *per se*, but because Estonians speak Estonian, the national language, as their mother tongue. This means, in this case, that a firm language policy was seen as a means of distributing power and opportunities among ethnic groups. At the same time, the other student with an alternative identity (Jõhvi_li_M) did not share

this understanding and felt that Estonians usually did not have any advantage over other ethnic groups. He explained the potential difference in opportunities between groups as the result of variance in levels of education and work experience. For example:

Russians in Estonia think that their rights are limited and that you can't get a high post if you have a Russian surname (Kohtla-Järve_rus_F1).

It's a widespread view among Russian-speaking people that 'to be Estonian' means having an advantage over other nationalities, for example at work. But cases where this actually happens are rare; in reality, Estonians are those who have education, a track record, experience and so forth (Jõhvi_li_M).

To put it briefly, despite the differences in self-identification strategies, the students often described ethno-cultural categories through linguistic aspects and power relations. However, the interviewees with a Russian identity tended to focus more on the cultural side of being Russian or Estonian, and they were the only ones who expressed ethnic pride. Some students with an Estonian-Russian identity had a noticeably more negative image of both Russians and Estonians. Only the interviewees with an alternative identity directly linked power relations to a command of Estonian, or disagreed with the claim that power relations existed in society.

6. Mediation of ethno-cultural self-descriptions

Analysis in previous studies (Soll 2013, Soll et al. 2014) of the role of the language of instruction in ethno-cultural self-descriptions revealed that identity groups do not differentiate between languages of instruction i.e. students with the same language of instruction resort to different self-identification strategies. The students differentiate schools with different languages of instruction mainly based on points related to language acquisition. Some interviewees with a Russian identity emphasised that the choice of the language of instruction is important in terms of the acquisition of Estonian and that those in Estonian-medium schools and language immersion classes are better off in this respect; according to the students, those in Russian-medium schools are at a disadvantage because Estonian is not acquired to the extent later required for making decisions about further education and jobs. However, the students are unanimous that Estonian-medium schools do not sufficiently promote the development of Russian as a mother tongue. Although students with various identity strategies feel that both languages are acquired in a language immersion class, opposite positions were also expressed. When explaining language choices, among others the **simplicity argument** – meaning that studying in Russian-medium schools is easier – came up in discussions. Others present specific arguments for advantages, e.g. that studying in Russian ensures the better acquisition of knowledge in school subjects, but somewhat lower knowledge of the official language. These advantages of

attending Russian-medium schools are referred to by students with different identities.

Also, the students' arguments connected language choices with **emotional security**. On the one hand, security depends on language skills and the resulting openness to communication; but on the other hand, on being surrounded by others from your ethnic group. In the interviews, the students with various ethno-cultural identities referred to this aspect of emotional security related to language choices.

To summarise, we can conclude that there is no direct connection between language of instruction and ethnic self-identification: different ethno-cultural strategies and different unique combinations characterise students in different school settings. For these reasons, we will analyse the relationships between ethno-cultural self-descriptions and mediums other than the formal language of instruction. First, direct attitudes to the change in the language of instruction are analysed. Secondly, various indirect expressions of social affiliation as one area in which attitudes to language policy changes can become embedded are studied.

6.1. Change in the language of instruction

Students' opinions about the transition to Estonian-language instruction can be generally divided into four groups: completely in favour of the transition; partly in favour of it; hesitant or indifferent; and in favour of preserving the former system.

Those **completely in favour of the transition** were also prepared to support the transition of the entire education system to Estonian-language instruction i.e. at the basic and nursery school levels as well. The main arguments for the switch included the status of Estonian as the official language, the low quality of Russian-medium education, a personal need to acquire Estonian and the opportunity to mitigate tension between Estonians and Russians (cf., for example, Tartu_rus_F2). It was also believed that it would be easier to study in Estonian if the transition were carried out at an earlier level of education (Tartu_li_M). Similarly to those opposed to the educational change, those in favour of it expressed a confident Russian identity, but manifested a variety of personal experiences as to the language of instruction. It follows that the interviewees' positions were not necessarily related to their personal experiences. One such factor could be the intense politicisation of the educational change in media coverage in the 2010/2011 academic year (Salvet 2012) as parliamentary elections were taking place that year and participants in the debate were clearly either in favour of or against the transition. As a result, students may have felt compelled to take a firm stand on the matter. For example:

*As I want to continue my studies at Tallinn University of Technology, I had myself transferred from *** [one school] to *** [another school]. But I tend to think I wasn't able to get a grip on maths in Estonian. So I'm of the opinion that fundamental subjects should be taught in Estonian from as early on as the first grade (Tartu_li_M).*

I'm all for closing Russian-medium schools. When Russian schools no longer exist, racism between Estonians and Russians will disappear as well (Tartu_rus_F2).

The second group was formed of those only **partially in favour of the transition**. Some thought that the change was rushed and that it could be carried out more smoothly; the main reason given was the insufficient preparedness of students (Kohtla-Järve_rus_F1). Unlike the first group, they were not in favour of the transition at levels of education other than upper secondary. Both interviewees in the sub-group had an alternative or mixed identity and lived and studied in Ida-Viru County – a predominantly Russian-language environment (unlike those who lived in Tartu and Tallinn and were in favour of the transition). As one interviewee in this sub-group was studying at a Russian-medium school (Kohtla-Järve_rus_F1) and the other in a language immersion class (Jõhvi_li_M), both had first-hand experience of the transition. For example:

I think it was a bit unexpected. One year everything's in Russian and the next it's the opposite. I think the transition could have been organised more smoothly. But it's all up to those affected; it wasn't difficult for me. I just needed both Russian- and Estonian-language copies of the textbooks to understand everything (Kohtla-Järve_rus_F1).

There was another group partly in favour of the transition, but they supported the change being implemented to a lesser extent. Unlike the previous group, they did not feel that the transition was rushed – it was the scope of its implementation that was problematic for them (Tartu_est_F, Tallinn_li_F). However, to ensure a better command of Estonian earlier on in the education system, they were prepared to support a transition in Russian-medium basic schools on a smaller scale (Tartu_est_F). They were nevertheless against the transition of the entire education system to Estonian-language teaching. Those in favour of a small-scale transition represented different identities, including one with an insecure Estonian-Russian identity (Tartu_est_F) and one with a confident Russian identity (Tallinn_li_F). Also, their experiences with the language of instruction were not the same (Estonian for Tartu_est_F and language immersion for Tallinn_li_F). For example:

I think it'd be reasonable to a certain extent. Although the Russian-medium education system shouldn't be abolished, it'd be useful for Russian-speaking students to have a good command of Estonian (Tartu_est_F).

I think there are a few subjects – like chemistry and physics – that should be taught in the mother tongue, which is to say Russian, because that ensures a good grasp of such complicated subjects (Tallinn_li_F).

In addition to those who were in favour of the change to Estonian-language instruction, others were **indifferent or hesitant regarding the transition** (for example, Tartu_rus_F1, Tartu_est_M) or changed their position in the course of the interview. In both cases it seemed that the interviewees were not especially interested in the educational change. As regards graduates of the upper secondary school studying in Estonian (Kohtla-Järve_est_F, Tartu_est_M), their indifference may be attributed to the fact that the transition has no direct bearing on them. Also,

the contradictory nature of their identity may be seen as a reason, bearing in mind that these students belonged to the group with an Estonian-Russian identity. Also, a student in a Russian-medium school in Tartu and with a Russian ethno-cultural identity was indifferent to the transition (Tartu_rus_F1); her indifference may be attributed to her command of both languages, which means that the language of instruction and any change to it are of no significance to her. For example:

I'm not very informed about the matter, and it was a long time ago. Studying in Estonian isn't a problem for me. I'm not concerned about my future language of instruction, which is why I'm not familiar with the topic (Tartu_rus_F1).

[What do you know about the transition to Estonian as the language of instruction?] Nothing. Estonian has to be studied anyway (exam) (Tartu_est_M).

The last group of arguments were presented **in favour of preserving the former system** and strictly against the transition to Estonian in upper secondary school or at any other level of education. The interviewees highlighted that the Russian-speaking population is entitled to obtain education in their mother tongue to preserve their language and culture. Interviewees identified more intensive studies of Estonian as the main goal of the transition, but did not feel a need to enhance their command of the language at a personal level. Maintaining the former system was favoured primarily by students with a confident Russian identity. For example, one student (Tallinn_rus_M) suggested that in addition to maintaining the Russian-medium education system, Russian should be granted the status of the second official language. Such strong opposition to the transition may be related to a negative personal experience (a lower level of academic knowledge due to the transition). For example:

I don't agree with the transition to instruction in the national language because there are so many Russians living in Estonia. In light of which, Russian should be given the status of the second official language (Tallinn_li_M).

I think Russian-medium schools should stay as they are, with Estonian taught as a foreign language at them (Kohtla-Järve_est_M).

So, the results indicate that in terms of attitudes regarding the change in language of instruction, interest in the transition and a firm stand on the matter are more likely paired with a confident ethno-cultural identity, while indifference and difficulties in adapting to the transition appear to be associated with a (potentially) insecure ethno-cultural identity.

6.2. General social affiliation

In addition to mediums directly related to changes in language policy, the role of references related to general social affiliation as one area where attitudes to language policy changes can become embedded are analysed here. Based on the arguments presented by the students, identity carriers external to language policy can be categorised according to the temporal-spatial social cohesion referred to in the interviews. On the one hand, arguments can be distinguished on the basis of

spatial references for explanations related to their place of residence as well as for habits and attitudes regarding media consumption. On the other hand, the focuses of the ethno-cultural identities of the students originated from temporal references, being expressed in this analysis in discussions about their plans for the future.

First, **ethno-cultural identity groups are analysed across abstract media space** in terms of formal media consumption habits and perceived cultural unity. The results demonstrate that the media consumption of students with a Russian ethno-cultural focus varies to a great extent. Similarly to other self-identification groups, electronic media was the primary media form consumed; some students viewed online media as their main source of information on topical events (Tartu_rus_F2), while others used news sites as a complementary source of information (Kohtla-Järve_est_M). Unlike others, the given group not only read online comments (Tallinn_li_F), but also actively participated in the process i.e. posted comments (Tartu_rus_F2, Tallinn_li_F). Another trait characteristic of students with the given self-identification strategy was viewing social media as a main source of information. For example:

I check out [online news portal] Delfi every day, reading news and other items of interest... I don't visit other sites :) /.../ I always read items and post comments on subjects related to children or nationality issues, for example (Tartu_rus_F2).

I sometimes visit the Delfi [online news] portal (Kohtla-Järve_est_M).

To me, it's interesting to read the comments, because they reflect the majority opinion /.../ Yes [I have posted comments] (Tallinn_li_F).

Almost all of the students with a Russian ethno-cultural identity used television as a source of information besides online media: for some it was one of the most important mediums (Tallinn_li_F), while others consumed it less often (Tartu_rus_F1). Radio and print media were followed in a more or less equal amount: both were listened to or read by about half of the interviewees with a confident ethno-cultural identity (Kohtla-Järve_rus_F2). The given group was characterised by favouring mainly Russian-language media; from time to time, media was used in other languages as well. For example:

The media channels I look at most frequently are online media and television (Tallinn_li_F).

To a lesser extent, I check out the news on TV or online news sites (Tartu_rus_F1).

I mostly get information from magazines, the radio and online media (Kohtla-Järve_rus_F2).

Those with an insecure identity with an Estonian-Russian focus could be divided into two groups on the basis of their media consumption: some followed no media whatsoever (Tartu_est_M), while others displayed media-following habits of moderate diversity, referring to three or four media channels (Tartu_est_F). The main media channels mentioned were television and daily newspapers. Unlike the previous group, or those with a confident Russian identity,

the use of online media as a source of information was relatively rare (only one interviewee referred to reading online comments). Media was followed in Estonian and Russian; one interviewee mentioned using English-language channels. For example:

I don't really use them. I keep an eye out for subjects like physics, technology, psychology and physical characteristics (on Discovery), but I rarely find anything of interest at times that suit me (Tartu_est_M).

I tend to look at Russian-language media: Channel One for news. I prefer to watch Russian-language TV shows. They seem better to me. But I also watch [Estonian Television newscast] Aktuaalne Kaamera and read [Estonian daily newspaper] Postimees (Tartu_est_F).

Students with alternative or mixed identities stood out for their relatively uniform media consumption habits. Similarly to interviewees with an insecure identity, this group is characterised by media consumption of moderate diversity. While the interviewees with alternative or mixed identities resemble those with a confident Russian identity regarding online media as one of the most important sources of information, they differ from the latter in their lack of television consumption. Other arguments, e.g. the frequency of reading daily newspapers and the language of the media consumed, indicated relatively varied focuses of the identity group and were not very different from those of other groups. Similarly to a couple of interviewees with a confident Russian identity who frequently listened to the radio, there was one interviewee (Kohtla-Järve_rus_F1) in the group who listened to the radio quite often. For example:

Mostly [I read] online news sites. And the radio – it's always on when I'm in the car. I read magazines the least. /.../ In Russian (Kohtla-Järve_rus_F1).

As for different media channels, primarily online news, daily newspapers and magazines. But also print versions of daily newspapers quite often. /.../ Mainly in Russian and English, and sometimes in Estonian (Jõhvi_li_M).

Besides the shared media space, students differed **in terms of their connectedness to physical space**, which arose in discussions about their plans for the future.

Similarly to other identity groups, students with a Russian identity associated the near future with continuing their studies; however, some interviewees referred to the possibility of **building a future for themselves in Estonia or abroad (Russia)**. Some interviewees considered continuing their studies at an Estonian university as the only option available to them (Tartu_li_M); others wavered between continuing their studies in Estonia or Russia (Kohtla-Järve_rus_F2); while still others wanted to continue their studies elsewhere in Scandinavia (Tallinn_li_F). Interviewees who contemplated two possibilities – staying in Estonia or going to Russia – failed to give specific arguments for their choices in the context of their ethno-cultural affiliations, but since at least one of them at an earlier stage of the interview referred to Russia as the carrier of their respective national identity, the role of ethno-cultural self-identification strategies in making such choices cannot be ruled out. For example:

I plan to study electrical drives and power electronics at the Tallinn University of Technology (Tartu_li_M).

I'll try to go and study in Russia to become a philologist or microbiologist. I'm also interested in journalism. Another possibility is taking up philology studies at the University of Tartu (Kohtla-Järve_rus_F2).

I plan to study in Denmark (Tallinn_li_F).

While in the short term those in the specific identity group referred to several alternative places of residence, within 10 years they would prefer to be living in a foreign country, resembling other identity groups in this respect. The same applies to students who considered both Estonian and Russian universities when speaking about their plans for the near future: within 10 years they perceived living in Russia as the only viable option (Tartu_rus_F1). One interviewee stood out among others, expressing a desire to secure a future for himself in Estonia in the long term (Tartu_li_M). As for the longer term, the interviewees mentioned the importance of other material (Tartu_rus_F1) or hedonistic values (Tallinn_li_M) in addition to continuing their studies. For example:

I'd like to continue living in Estonia, but at the same time I' like to put my abilities to the test somewhere else (Tartu_li_M).

In 10 years' time I see myself with basic education (a Master's degree), a husband and a child. I'll be living near Moscow, working and studying in distance education. My husband will be a military official; we'll have an apartment with all the mod cons. And a dog (Tartu_rus_F1).

Meaningful and exciting (Tallinn_li_M).

Unlike students with a Russian ethno-cultural identity, those with an Estonian-Russian identity expressed a somewhat stronger desire **to associate their near future with Estonia** (Tartu_est_F). One interviewee (Tartu_est_M) was an exception, but even for him, staying in Estonia and finding a job here was a more viable option than applying to a US university. Similarly to other groups, the future plans of the interviewee included higher education, although students in this group had already made up their mind as to their career choices (Tartu_est_F). A measure of identity-related insecurity was also expressed by one interviewee (Tartu_est_M), who felt pressured by his parents to make certain choices and avoid becoming politically involved, although he would prefer to stay in Estonia in the near future. For example:

After graduating from school I want to continue my studies in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Tartu (Tartu_est_F).

I want to go to the USA, because 1) the weather's always the same here; 2) there I can work as a computer game designer; 3) there are girls who are interested in computers; and so on. But I won't go, because my parents are against it. I have no idea what I'll do then. I'll start a company here with my brother and try not to get involved in politics (Tartu_est_M).

While in terms of the near future the students in this identity group associated their future primarily with Estonia, similarly to other groups they expressed a

desire to live abroad in the long term. The fact that they preferred a foreign country as a place of residence can be partially explained by their self-identification strategy – instead of ethno-cultural affiliations, the interviewees identified themselves through other aspects of social identity (e.g. in territorial terms, being part of Europe). Also, the desire to move abroad was attributed to the fact that achieving the status of an Estonian-language native seemed out of reach: the negative attitude towards Russians in Estonia and the resulting lack of security were mentioned (Tartu_est_F). In addition to their self-identification, the interviewees in this group also referred to instrumental and success-oriented arguments when explaining their desire to leave Estonia. For instance, foreign countries were valued for their better educational opportunities and jobs, higher standard of living and so forth. The instrumentality of the interviewees in this group is also displayed in that, unlike other groups, success is first and foremost associated with professional goals (Tallinn_rus_M) and financial goals (Tartu_est_F); having a family, which was frequently mentioned in the group with a confident Russian identity, was not referred to in the Estonian-Russian identity group. For example:

I plan to graduate from school, get good exam results, apply to the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Tartu and, after about 10 years, complete my studies, preferably somewhere abroad (Tallinn_rus_M).

I can't be doing with Estonians disliking Russians – there's no tolerance. Estonia's so small, but the people here are so mean /.../ I believe that [in 10 years' time] I'll be a doctor, I'll have a nice place to live, and a car, and I'll be able to support my loved ones financially and emotionally/.../ [I'll be living] abroad (Tartu_est_F).

Similarly to other groups, interviewees with alternative or mixed identities expressed a desire to associate their future with Estonia (Kohtla-Järve_rus_F1) or a foreign country (Jõhvi_li_M). One interviewee wished to combine university studies in a specific field with work, while the other did not specify potential career choices or the number of options. Similarly to other groups, their European identity was given as an argument for their moving abroad. For example:

I'm planning to go to university here and possibly work at the same time (Kohtla-Järve_rus_F1).

I'm planning to take up studies abroad. Because here, in Estonia, it's more difficult to find a respectable and suitable profession, as regards language for example (Jõhvi_li_M).

Like other groups, the interviewees with an alternative identity preferred to live abroad in the long term. Such results indicate that factors other than self-identification strategies (e.g. discord between national groups and perceiving moving abroad as a sign of success) may be the underlying reasons prompting a move abroad. In terms of goals for the future, this group resembles other identity groups, especially in terms of interviewees with a confident Russian identity and as regards having a family and career options. An explanation for the lack of territorial ties with Estonia among the interviewees with an alternative identity can

be found in a position expressed by one interviewee (Jõhvi_li_M): namely, after having moved abroad he will likely replace his (Estonian) citizenship with a “better” one (probably that of another European country). However, the group does not display clear differences compared with other groups. For example:

I think that by then I'll be living abroad. That's my goal. I'll be working in my professional field (Kohtla-Järve_rus_F1).

If I'm accepted into a university abroad and am able to graduate, I'll probably settle down there and bring my relatives over, too. But there's another option: I'll return to give up my citizenship and exchange it for a better one (Jõhvi_li_M).

In conclusion, plans for the future of different identity groups were relatively practical and instrumental. One possible reason for this is the popular definition of success and failure, and what is expected of young people as a result in the public and domestic spheres: higher education, studying and working abroad, working in your professional field et al. are perceived as signs of success and, as such, are reflected in the interviewees' plans for the future. In certain cases, plans for the future were associated with arguments related to self-identification, and these potential relationships primarily manifested in discussions about their future countries of residence.

7. Conclusions

The transition to Estonian-language instruction in upper secondary schools in Estonia means a move towards a uniform language system. At the same time, one of the essential aims is to support students' preparedness for successfully coping in society. Previous studies (Kello and Masso 2010a, 2010b, Kello et al. 2009, Masso and Soll 2014) analysed preparedness for the educational change – both attitudes and the estimated language proficiency as one prerequisite for the transition to Estonian-language instruction. In this study we aimed to analyse students' ethno-cultural self-descriptions in the context of this transition.

The analysis of online interviews revealed that while students self-identified on different bases (e.g. universal identification with humankind, and students' social identity), ethno-cultural identity was one possible source of the “we” feeling. Two dimensions defining students' self-identification strategies emerged from the analysis: ethno-cultural practices; and emotional-cognitive confidence in identity. Following the combinations of these dimensions, three self-identification strategies were discerned: confident identity with a confident Russian focus; insecure identity with an Estonian-Russian focus; and alternative or mixed identities. Ethnic self-descriptions are based on a range of variables: besides mother tongue and home language, cultural traditions and place of birth were mentioned. When describing the ethnic groups in Estonia, asymmetrical power relations were raised, e.g. when explaining better opportunities on the labour market and in society as a whole. When explaining educational opportunities

(including those related to the language of instruction), inequality was not directly mentioned; however, a feeling of inequality may be why the transition to Estonian-language instruction is perceived as a narrowing of the choices open to Russian-speakers, pressure to assimilate or generally as a danger to ethnic identity.

Similarly to previous studies (Soll 2006, 2012), analysis of languages of instruction indicates that there is no unequivocal relationship between self-identification and the actual language of instruction experience. Also, the description of schools with various languages of instruction, and also Estonians and Russians as ethnic groups, is not related to the factual language of instruction of the students. The fact that the geographical place of residence does not directly influence how students define themselves ethnically or what they think about the change of language of instruction has been shown by previous studies also (Masso, Soll 2013, Soll 2006, 2012). On the basis of this we can conclude that attitudes to educational innovation related to language and language policy are not influenced by the linguistic environment but rather depend on a person's understanding of how the change in language affects group status and language use.

Similar variability in opinions emerged in attitudes to the main language policy change in Estonia – the transition to Estonian-language instruction. Among interviewees with a confident ethno-cultural identity some are completely in favour of the switch, because the reform is seen as the only way to acquire Estonian at the required level; and there are those who are against the transition because it is perceived as a danger to their language and culture. Students who displayed a cognitively insecure identity with an Estonian-Russian focus were somewhat more indifferent than others. Interviewees in the group with alternative or mixed identities support the transition to Estonian-language instruction, but at a pace slower than the present one, and they are definitely against Estonian-language instruction in basic school. Interviewees with a confident Russian identity were more interested in the transition to Estonian-language instruction and had a clear position on the matter, while it was those with an insecure Estonian-Russian identity who were indifferent to and troubled by the changes.

Similar opposition to and concerns regarding educational changes have been indicated in previous studies (Masso et al. 2013, Vihalemm et al. 2011). The results of this study indicate that in terms of the changing status of Russian – on the one hand resulting from the need to speak Estonian, and on the other from the recognition that parallel Estonian- and Russian-medium institutions will not be preserved in all social spheres (*Ibid.*) – the most vulnerable group is those with an insecure identity. Such an identity may hinder adaption to socio-cultural and political change, which will be followed by alterations to the understanding of oneself and other groups (Hall 2007), which is difficult to cope with in the case of insecure identities. Only a few students assessed emotional and cultural attachment as essential factors related to the language of instruction. These results can be explained by the fact that opinions related to the transition to Estonian-language instruction are affected by secondary sources rather than personal experiences.

The interview results indicate that interviewees have partly embraced the public message communicated within the education system (including schools in particular and policy in general), but their self-descriptions also rely on personal experience. However, the study language does not communicate clear cultural and social aims within schools, or at least not in ways that are understandable to students. Attitudes to the language policy are related to ethno-cultural self-descriptions rather than factual experiences with the language of instruction, indicating a need to take into consideration the cultural features related to change in language policy rather than instrumental language issues. A similar conclusion can be drawn about media use habits – ethnic self-descriptions distinguish students regarding their habits and preferences more clearly than the actual language of instruction. Also, general social affiliation distinguishes students regarding their ethno-cultural self-descriptions in such a way that an uncertain Russian identity may lead to a wish to emigrate from Estonia. The reason for the weak connection to Estonia may be the public discourse of language policy in the country, which has an instrumental and success-oriented focus i.e. one that for students is individually less accepted than the European identity, which students associate with quality of life and citizenship.

Based on the approach of Luhmann (2004), we can conclude that the transition to Estonian-language instruction has partly failed in terms of communication due to the weak social affiliation expressed by the students. Unsuccessful communication may be caused by the fact that schools are not able to fully control the complex interaction between teachers and students (cf. e.g. Luhmann 2004, Masso and Soll 2013, Vanderstraeten 2004) including not only instruction, but also the intermediation of institutional (and social) changes and the development of respective interpretation skills in students. Based on the results of the study we can conclude that the change in the language of instruction does not only entail issues related to ethno-cultural identity (like preservation or creation of identity) or instrumental issues related to language knowledge (like the acquisition of subject knowledge in a language other than the mother tongue) – rather, change in the language of instruction involves a shift in cultural codes due to forced identification choices in the context of symbolic power struggles.

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