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# Reviving Minority Identities through Cultural Autonomy: Evidence from Estonia

## Summary

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Awareness of the importance of preserving the identity, language and culture of small ethnic groups has significantly increased in recent years. Among various political measures to achieve this goal, cultural autonomy for ethnic minorities could be a suitable approach. This policy paper analyses the legislation and functioning of cultural autonomy in Estonia. It demonstrates that the institutional structure and flexible operational framework of this autonomy model can contribute to achieving the goal of preserving and reviving endangered minority identities. However, the way the autonomy law defines ethnic minorities, as well as the requirement of a minimum population threshold, reduces its functionality regarding this purpose. Improving the model by considering these shortcomings would allow it to be used for the interests of small and endangered minorities.



## Recommendations

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- ▶ Consider the use of institutional structures of Estonian cultural autonomy as a role model for the preservation and revival of endangered minority identities.
- ▶ Use national registries as a tool to increase inner cohesion and sense of community for dispersed minorities.
- ▶ Design a flexible operational framework to give minorities the opportunity to use the provided autonomy arrangement.
- ▶ Address potential capacity issues of minority groups directly and avoid introducing arbitrary minimum thresholds of population.
- ▶ Consider whether, and to what extent, it is necessary to apply the requirement of long-term permanent ties with the state, and, depending on the circumstances, consider waiving it.
- ▶ Consider extending cultural autonomy to those minority groups whose difference from the dominant nation may not be obvious, or is debatable, but whose distinctive culture or language still could benefit from it.

## Introduction

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The extinction of small lingual and cultural communities has accelerated significantly in recent decades (Zhang & Mace, 2021), and, consequently, it has become increasingly recognised as a problem (Appell, 2018). However, when creating a solution, much depends on the existing internal coherence, initiative and proactivity of the minorities themselves — which does not favour weak and endangered communities. Against this background, states have the potential to contribute more to increase the internal unity of endangered minority groups by creating appropriate legal frameworks that these communities would be able to use for their benefit.

Cultural autonomy is a potential tool for the ‘preservation and development of minority cultures’ as suggested by the Council of Europe’s Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (2008, p. 33). However, to assess the suitability of this autonomy arrangement for weak and endangered minority communities it is important to better understand how existing models of cultural autonomy are currently functioning.

Estonian cultural autonomy has been used as a model for other countries’ autonomy arrangements (Decker, 2007), but several authors have criticised it for being non-functioning and providing only symbolic additional tools for minorities to protect their interests (e.g., Kössler & Zabielska, 2009; Lagerspetz, 2014; Smith, 2014). However, since cultural autonomy in Estonia has been used by the almost extinct Swedish and small (Ingrian) Finnish minorities for years (and these communities have deemed cultural autonomy necessary and useful for their interests), it is sensible to ask if, and to what extent, this model is suitable for reviving and preserving the identity of such small communities like Swedes and (Ingrian) Finns in Estonia?

This paper reviews strengths and weaknesses of the Estonian cultural autonomy model in regard to its suitability for revival, preservation and protection of endangered minority identities. Recommendations are proposed as to how it would be possible to improve the model to achieve the goal of preserving the identity, language and culture of small ethnic groups.

## Swedish and Finnish minorities in Estonia

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Historically, Estonian Swedes lived compactly in the western part of Estonia from at least the 13th century. Now, in the 21st century, their ethnic group has almost completely vanished partially due to the evacuations to Sweden during the Second World War (Katus et al., 1997), where only a few of those who self-identified themselves as Swedes remained in Estonia at that time. The other core reason for the decline in numbers is the assimilation of the Swedes into Estonian culture, resulting in a number of their descendants living in Estonia today. These are the people who laid the foundation for the Swedish Cultural Self-Administration trying to revive the identity and intangible cultural heritage i.e., historical practices, knowledge and skills of Estonian Swedes that have become almost lost. As one of the provisions of the autonomy law requiring permanent residence in Estonia has been interpreted flexibly by the Ministry of Culture, the self-administration also includes descendants of Estonian Swedes living permanently outside Estonia but have regained the Estonian citizenship. This has increased the role of cross-border cooperation in shaping the modern identity of Estonian Swedes.

The Ingrian Finnish minority lived as a small ethnic group in eastern Estonia around River Narva. However, the main area of Ingrian Finns – Ingria – located between River Narva and Lake Ladoga, was, and remains, outside Estonian territory in the current territory of Russia (Matley, 1979). Due to the population resettlements during and after the Second World War, Ingrian Finns now live scattered in various parts of Estonia and have created several local ethno-cultural organisations. However, the number of Ingrian Finns is not sufficient to establish a sustainable Ingrian Finnish Cultural Self-Administration. An attempt at self-administration was first tried in 2004, but was disrupted between 2007 and 2017. Since then, the self-administration includes the so-called Finland Finns who do not have personal ancestral ties with Ingria but who have permanently moved from Finland to Estonia in recent decades, subsequently acquiring Estonian citizenship. Although taking advantage of the knowledge and activity of these people, Ingrian Finnish culture is still the priority of the self-administration.

In summary, Swedish and (Ingrian) Finnish minorities in Estonia have different historical backgrounds, geographical structure and population dynamics. However, both groups have weak group identities, as numerous members do not speak their ethnic language as a native language, and both groups have historically shown strong tendency to assimilation – Swedes mostly to Estonian culture and Ingrian Finns to Estonian or Russian culture. Connections and cooperation with Sweden and Finland respectively also influence the identity and capacity of both groups. Therefore, against this background, both communities appear to be clear targets for autonomy models aimed at supporting the revival and preservation of endangered minority identities.

## Institutional framework of autonomy

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According to the Estonian National Minorities Cultural Autonomy Act (1993), cultural self-administrations – the institutional bodies of autonomy – are based on national registries. Relying on the latter, cultural self-administrations must hold elections to cultural councils every three years. In addition to the cultural council, cultural boards are required by the law, with the responsibility of organising the activity of the institutions of cultural self-administration. The self-administration has the right to create local cultural councils or appoint local cultural councillors. This structure means that self-administrations function like an umbrella organisation to various ethno-cultural organisations, managing and coordinating the activity of these institutions. National registries and the multi-level structure make a cultural self-administration different from typical non-governmental organisations (NGO), which otherwise may have similar goals. Maintaining such a structure requires minorities to be initiative-taking and have sufficient capacities inside the community in pursuing their goals. At the same time, cultural self-administrations do not expect individuals to do more than just have their name listed in the national registry compared to the NGOs who may require more active membership.

Although Swedish and Finnish minorities in Estonia are small and economically weak, they are motivated to engage with the concept of autonomy. They have established their cultural self-administrations, have created and manage their national registries, and, despite some difficulties, are holding regular elections to the institutional bodies. Having established and used the institutional framework provided for by the law, they are able to use their own inner resources and state funding to make their ethno-cultural activity more efficient. Consequently, the cohesion of their communities is increased and the group identity of dispersed individuals strengthened. Furthermore, the self-administrations use national registries not only for elections, but also to gather individuals in a single information field where every member of the self-administration can be informed about what is happening in their ethno-cultural community without being a member of any specific organisation.

## Flexible operational framework

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The autonomy law formulates multiple broad fields of activity for cultural self-administrations. While the structure of autonomous institutions is strictly regulated by the law, activities the self-administrations can make use of are much more flexible. They have the right to create and manage specific institutions if they have the motivation and capacity to do so, including institutions for native-language education, institutions of national culture, enterprises and publishing houses as well as social welfare institutions (§ 24). They also may organise the study of native language and create foundations, stipends and awards to improve their cultural and educational position (§ 5). To finance this, self-administrations may

have funds allocated from several sources including funding from the state budget and from the local municipalities for eligible activities.

The activity of the Swedish and Finnish Cultural Self-Administrations is project-based, aimed at organising single events and generating outputs such as publications, restored material heritage, memorials etc. For these purposes, the self-administrations redistribute financial resources, including state funding to various projects within its organisations. In addition, creation of the ethno-cultural information field appears to have increased the activity and interest of individuals regarding material and intangible heritage and raised awareness of the history of both minorities in and outside the community. Consequently, a strengthening of the group identity is already noticeable. Considering that the development of collective identity is a lengthy process affected by multiple factors and has unknown results, it is normal that neither of the self-administrations has extensively used the opportunity to establish their native language educational or social welfare institutions. While at present there is neither enough demand nor capacity inside both ethnic groups to use all opportunities, it is not impossible that it could happen in the future.

## Minimum population threshold

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While the autonomy law emphasises the right of individuals of ethnic minorities to maintain their 'ethnic belonging, cultural customs, mother tongue and religion' (§ 3), implicitly presenting this as one of the aims of cultural autonomy, it also has a peculiar requirement that most ethnic minorities living in Estonia must have a population of over three thousand individuals to get the right to establish a cultural self-administration. Since the population of most ethnic minorities in Estonia is under three thousand, they are automatically deprived of the autonomy regardless of whether they have sufficient inner capacities and willingness to use it. Furthermore, according to the law, three thousand individuals must be included in the national registry which means that the minorities cannot rely merely on census data but must consolidate the number of individuals registered.

Exclusive right, however, is granted for German, Russian, Swedish and Jewish minorities since the current law is based on the pre-war cultural autonomy and these minorities were eligible for and/or exercised the right to autonomy at that time. The almost extinct Swedish minority has been able to use the autonomy due to the exclusive right provided for by the law. However, the population of the community remains below one thousand and even among these people not all self-identify unequivocally as Swedes. Whereas the Finnish Cultural Self-Administration must comply with the requirement, and it has struggled over the years. The former chairperson of the Finnish Cultural Self-Administration has therefore considered the law discriminatory and threatening for the sustainability of their self-administration (Kabanen, 2017). While the Finnish Cultural Self-Administration has survived, despite the difficulties, the requirement is a clear obstacle to further expansion of cultural autonomy in Estonia. This is especially the case with these small ethnic groups who have been settled



in Estonia during the Soviet occupation and have been struggling to preserve their identity in a Russian-speaking environment (Aidarov & Drechsler, 2013).

## Definition of ethnic minority

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According to the autonomy law, members of ethnic minorities should be considered Estonian citizens who live in the territory of Estonia, have 'long-term, sound and permanent ties' with Estonia, are distinctive 'by their ethnic belonging, cultural characteristics, religion or language' and wish to maintain their 'cultural customs, religion or language' that are the basis of their identity (§ 1). As such, the definition is heavily correlated to the idea of identity preservation. However, the minimum population threshold deprives most minorities of autonomy, particularly some endangered ethnic groups, and as such this definition of minority can be considered to be poorly aligned to the reality of cultural and lingual diversity in Estonia

To clarify, historical minorities designated by a certain ethnonym may have largely disappeared by now, and individuals currently designated by the same ethnonym no longer have ancestral or cultural ties with these historical communities. This applies, for example, to Germans, Jews and Russians who have the exclusive right for autonomy but mostly are neither descendants of respective minorities who lived in Estonia before the Second World War nor have strong cultural connection with them. Furthermore, the requirement of strong historical ties can be a potential obstacle for these small minorities settled in Estonia during Soviet times and meeting the numerical threshold required should they wish to establish a self-administration. Finally, while according to the definition lingual minorities may have the right to use the autonomy, there have been no discussions in the society of whether these groups who are usually perceived as Estonians but differ linguistically such as Võros and Setos (the latter are to some extent culturally distinctive but are nevertheless not considered a separate ethnic group compared to Estonians) could use cultural autonomy.

## Policy implications

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The analysis of Estonian cultural autonomy demonstrates that its institutional framework, in particular national registries, and the common information field emerging from the autonomy, helps to consolidate a dispersed group of people and increase the sense of community. However, it seems that both Swedish and Finnish Cultural Self-Administrations can take advantage of the overall positive image of Sweden and Finland in Estonian society which makes them attractive among those individuals who otherwise would self-identify rather as Estonians. Thus, while institutional structures of cultural autonomy may improve the situation of small minorities it must also be considered that the extent to which it increases group cohesion also depends on the position of specific ethnic minority in the society.

The Estonian autonomy law provides for a flexible variety of activities and tools inside a fixed institutional framework. Cultural self-administrations can use different tools to achieve their goals and strengthen group identity. The fact that neither of the self-administrations has made use of all opportunities provided for by the autonomy law only reflects their current conditions and does not rule out that they will use additional means in the future. A sufficiently broad operational framework is therefore at first, useful to enable adaptation to changes taking place over time but second, it is adaptable to minorities with diverse needs and backgrounds.

On the downside, the minimum population threshold contradicts the aim of accommodating the needs of small and endangered minorities. Researchers have already pointed out that this requirement deprives most minorities of autonomy (Prina et al., 2019). Furthermore, while during the reading of the draft law in the Estonian Parliament, it was also stated that the law should be aimed at small minorities rather than the large Russian-speaking minority perceived as a security threat, the need for a minimum threshold was justified with the argument that smaller minorities would not have sufficient economic capacity to maintain their autonomous institutions. This justification contradicts the provision which allows certain ethnic groups to establish a self-administration without meeting the minimum threshold as it is not automatically granted that these minorities have more capacities for success compared to other minority groups. However, thanks to this exception, Swedish Cultural Self-Administration has been able to prove that small minorities can be successful in maintaining such a resource-intensive organisational structure. Thus, it would be more reasonable to address potential capacity issues directly without arbitrary generic minimum thresholds.

Both the minimum threshold and the requirement of strong historical ties with Estonia make cultural autonomy unsuitable for those small minorities who have been settled in Estonia during the Soviet occupation and who have steadily assimilated into Russian culture in recent decades. Although at the time of the adoption of the law, one of the goals of establishing the requirement of long-term permanent ties with Estonia was indeed to deprive the Soviet-era migrants of the right to autonomy, researchers have pointed out that cultural and lingual diversification of this group would also be in the interest of the state (Aidarov & Drechsler, 2013). As long-term permanent ties are also difficult to define and the law remains vague in this regard, it would be useful to avoid such categorical wording in the development of autonomy and to consider whether and what practical purpose such a requirement would serve.

Finally, the requirement of distinction from Estonians also makes cultural autonomy to some extent exclusive. It de facto deprives several linguistically distinctive groups of autonomy as they are not perceived as *ethnic* but merely *lingual* minorities in the society. Thus, today these groups use other tools to preserve their linguistic difference. However, making sense of cultural autonomy more broadly than of something aimed at groups clearly distinguishable from the dominant nation could help add value to the autonomy model and find new perspectives for it.



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ENTAN – The European Non-Territorial Autonomy Network aims at examining the concept of non-territorial autonomy (NTA). It particularly focuses on NTA arrangements for reducing inter-ethnic tensions within a state and on the accommodation of the needs of different communities while preventing calls to separate statehood. See more details at [www.entan.org](http://www.entan.org)

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