



## Bilingual School Highlights Estonian Language Politics

**OE Watch Commentary:** Many of the cities in North-Eastern Estonia have a high percentage of ethnic Russians. Kohtla-Järve is among these cities where the majority of its inhabitants speak Russian on a daily basis and its secondary schools reflect this reality. There is significant concern in the Estonian government that this system disadvantages students as future Estonian citizens. In order to work in Estonia, it is necessary to possess a certificate proving proficiency in the Estonian language and many students who are educated in Russian or bilingual schools do not possess this proficiency. For this reason, there has been increasing pressure for schools to provide education entirely in Estonian.

The accompanying excerpted article refers to the Estonian Education Minister, Maili Reps of Estonia's Centre Party, who has made the controversial decision to keep the local secondary school partially bilingual. The incoming tenth grade class will be taught entirely in Estonian but the upper two grades will continue to be taught in both Estonian and Russian. Even though Reps has concerns about making the transition to Estonian-only education, she recognizes the need for this change to happen eventually. Reps specifies that "resolute steps have to be taken, starting at the kindergarten level, to bring all students up to standard from a young age." The administration has hesitated to make the switch too quickly, concerned it will have a negative impact on students because, "many students coming to the school will have to take on additional Estonian 'cramming' lessons to bring them up to speed, on top of their already full curriculum."



Map of Estonia showing Kohtla-Järve location.  
Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Estonia\\_-\\_Location\\_Map\\_\(2013\)\\_-\\_EST\\_-\\_UNOCHA.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Estonia_-_Location_Map_(2013)_-_EST_-_UNOCHA.svg), CC 3.0.

This view has not been popular among members of other parties in Estonia, such as the Reform and Isamaa parties, who have voiced support for Estonian-only education. The article also points out that the Centre party has been criticized by others such as Erik Kalda, the editor-in-chief of *Põhjarannik*, a local daily newspaper. Kalda says that, "Centre party machinations and interests are causing Russian youth to suffer... as they miss out on another academic year of all-Estonian education." As a talking point during the recent Parliamentary campaign, the results of the election on 3 March are telling of the way Estonians think about this issue. The Reform party overwhelmingly won the elections with the Conservative People's Party (EKRE) and Isamaa taking the next two spots above the Centre Party. Language education in Estonia will continue to be a contentious issue. **End OE Watch Commentary (Dimmick)**

*"Ms Reps has already said resolute steps have to be taken, starting at the kindergarten level, to bring all students up to standard from a young age."*

**Source:** Andrew Whyte, "Opinion: Kohtla-Järve school case should be cause for national concern," *ERR News*, 18 February 2019. <https://news.err.ee/911396/opinion-kohtla-jarve-school-case-should-be-cause-for-national-concern>

*Since many students coming to the school will have to take on additional Estonian "cramming" lessons to bring them up to speed, on top of their already full curriculum, many will opt to go to the Russian-language upper secondary school in nearby Jõhvi instead.*

*Language in education is a key topic in party politics ahead of the general election on 3 March, with the Reform and Isamaa parties favoring Estonian-only, and Centre, the Social Democratic Party (SDE) and the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) erring more towards bilingual education for the time being.*

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*The Postimees opinion piece, which appeared on Sunday, entitled "why aren't we making a noise?" questions why there is hesitation on the issue and why Ms Reps has not met with the local Estonian-speaking population to poll their opinion on the matter.*

*The piece in turn cites an article by Erik Kalda, editor-in-chief of local daily Põhjarannik, who points to the bigger picture and why Centre is taking the stance that it is.*

*There are some 27,000 people in Ida Viru County whose first language is Estonian; the fact that they should feel excluded from decision making processes on language in education, with protracted meetings and communication via official letters, should sound alarm bells, Mr Kalda argued.*

*Centre party machinations and interests are causing Russian youth to suffer too, he says, as they miss out on another academic year of all-Estonian education.*