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Geographical names as culture, heritage and identity

Place Names and the Administrative Reform in Estonia

Submitted by Estonia**

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Place Names and the Administrative Reform in Estonia¹

In 2016–2017 a major reorganization is taking place in Estonia regarding the local governments. The overall aim is to make local governments more self-sustainable. The legislation adopted specially to implement the reform envisaged that the number of people in one municipality should exceed 5,000 (some exceptions, like small islands, will be allowed to continue). The municipalities that do not meet the criteria would have to join others. During 2016 the so-called voluntary stage of mergers took place, in 2017 the initiative to combine municipalities into bigger units will rest with the Government. All this process must be completed by October 2017, for the time of local elections. According to the latest decisions of the Government on 6 July, 2017 there will be 79 municipalities in Estonia, of these 15 are cities (*linn*), the rest are rural municipalities (*vald*). Prior to the reform the number of municipalities has been 213.

It is inevitable that when two or more municipalities merge, the question of their joint new name will come up. To address this issue, the Place Names Board of Estonia worked out general recommendations, so that the municipalities could evaluate their names prior to submitting their proposals to the Government. The sources for new names should preferably be

- a) parish names, or
- b) names of municipality centres (where the administration will be located).

Ecclesiastical parishes (Estonian *kihelkond*) have been the basis of local self-identification for centuries and still continue to play a role. In 2009 the names of parishes were also officialized as names having cultural and historic value.

If these two sources should not be adequate, the following categories of names could be acceptable:

- c) names of prominent features on the territory of the merging municipalities;
- d) names complemented with qualifying attributes (such as *Lääne*- 'western', *Põhja*- 'northern');
- e) compound names formed of the names of merging municipalities (as a last resource).

The process of approving the name for a municipality involves also the Place Names Board, the opinion of which will be forwarded to the Government together with the main application. When the Government made decisions in December 2016 – January 2017 on voluntary mergers of municipalities, it accepted several of the Board's recommendations, differently from the original proposal of the merging municipalities. When deciding the mergers on the initiative of the Government, the name proposed by the Board has been taken as a basis but the municipalities in question can raise their objections and propose a new name.

At the time of writing this report (July 2017) the final outcome was not yet known but some characteristic circumstances can be presented here.

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Municipalities that took care of the name issue since the start of their mutual negotiations were more likely to succeed in finding a common name than those that delayed the name issue (the reasons being often elsewhere). Agreeing on a name often proved to be a serious issue and this was reported widely in the media. In some cases, it seems, agreeing on a name was thought to be a part of a 'deal' (e.g., you get your name, we get the municipality centre) and this was a serious obstacle if one thinks of rational solutions. In some other cases, the merging municipalities agreed from the beginning that for the sake of parity no name of a merging municipality should be used as a new joint name and this again complicated the choice of names as it excluded historical names with a long tradition.

As examples of totally new names, one could give *Lääneranna vald* (< *läänerand* 'western coast'), *Põhjaranniku vald* (< *põhjarannik* 'northern shore') and *Kehtnakandi vald* (a hybrid name composed of parts of the names *Kehtna vald* and *Järvakandi vald*). The first was accepted but the last two were rejected by the Government and instead, *Toila vald* and *Kehtna vald* were approved.

Another typical problem was using a well-known name of a neighbouring feature (a big lake, etc.) or a name that only partially covered the territory of the merging municipalities. This was mainly done with the aim of using the 'market value' of the name as the names proposed were well-known and had a positive connotation. There were attempts to use the name of Peipsi (the largest lake lying on the border of Estonia and Russia) for several groupings of municipalities on the lake's coast, and two merging municipalities opted on the name of *Lahemaa vald*, the name Lahemaa denoting a wider geographical area and that of a national park. The Lahemaa name was rejected by the Government (instead, a name based on a parish name *Haljala vald* was approved) as some of the neighbouring municipalities protested (they would have had the same right to claim this name) but e.g. *Mulgi vald* was approved although it covered only a part of the cultural-historic area of Mulgimaa (but still could be considered as a nucleus of Mulgimaa).

In some cases, there were almost no rational sources for names as the proposed combinations of municipalities could not be based on any historical units. Thus, a name like *Järva vald* (a short form of Järvamaa, a county in central Estonia) was proposed for a left-over of municipalities that did not join the two other centres (Paide and Türi) in Järvamaa. Also, names like *Põhja-Pärnumaa vald* (< *põhja* 'northern', Pärnumaa is a county in southern Estonia) and *Põhja-Sakala vald* (Sakala is a reconstructed name of a historic division) will come into existence although in these two cases the names could have been given after the municipality centres (Vändra, Suure-Jaani).

It remains to be seen how will these names be implemented in reality and whether there will be some name changes afterwards. There will surely come up other issues as well. One predictable source of confusion will be that the word *linn* will in the future have two different meanings in some cases. For example, *Pärnu linn* will denote a larger territory, including some villages as a name of an administrative unit because some rural municipalities will join it. At the same time, *Pärnu linn* as a populated place will denote a smaller territory, the 'city proper' prior to its merger with other municipalities. In a full official address both references will be used, consecutively.

The role of counties (*maakond*) after the reform has not been finally determined yet. Although county administrations will be abolished after 1 January, 2018, the official administrative division into counties will remain for the time being and every municipality will be listed under one or another county. County boundaries will change in some cases as municipalities were allowed to merge irrespective of county boundaries.

Together with the merger of municipalities there will also be a need to rename some of the populated places (villages) as there can be no identical names of populated places within one municipality. This will take place before the final stage of reform in October 2017. As one solution, the Place Names Board has proposed that the duplicate names could be distinguished by adding qualifying attributes to the name, so that the main part of the name will still be recognized. It would not be recommended to get rid of the duplicate names simply by annexing the villages to other villages. While this renaming is still being discussed in the municipalities, the practice has shown that in many cases new names will be proposed that, however, will be contrary to the general aim of the Place Names Act. The names for populated places will be proposed by local municipalities and approved by the Minister of Public Administration.

Preliminary view of the future administrative division of Estonia (extract from Postimees Online, 6 July 2017, <http://pluss.postimees.ee/4170307/uus-esti-kaart-15-linna-64-valda>):

