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Place Names and the Administrative Reform in Estonia

Submitted by Estonia**

Administrative-Territorial Reform in Estonia

In 2015–2017 a major reorganization took place in Estonia regarding the local governments. The overall aim was to increase the administrative capacity of the local authority which will ensure the specialization of the officials and the rise in the quality of public service. 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, were made). The municipalities that did not meet the criteria had to join others. During 2016 the so-called voluntary stage of mergers took place, in 2017 the Government decided to combine municipalities that did not meet the criteria into bigger units. The process was completed in October 2017 with local elections. As a result of the reform, there are now 79 municipalities in Estonia, of these 15 are cities *(linn)*, the rest are rural municipalities *(vald).* Before the reform the number of municipalities was 213.

160 local governments out of 213 amalgamated voluntarily (86%). In 10 cases municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants (the minimum criteria of 5,000 inhabitants) were established. Therefore 26 local governments remained that did not pass the minimum criteria and failed to present a proposal for merger. The Government initiated merger processes for all of them except the 4 maritime islands (municipalities) which got the exemption in accordance with the law. During the process the Government decided according to the law to suspend the procedure of 10 such mergers as a result of an assessment of justifications presented in the opinion of a local government and continued to finalize with 26 proposals[1].

Changes to the names of municipalities

It was 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 final list included six recommended sources for names, of which the first two were considered to be the most important[2]:

    a) names of parishes and old rural municipalities;
    b) names of the centres of rural municipalities;
    c) prominent names (of natural features) in the territory of merging rural municipalities;
    d) county names containing a compass point;
    e) new names;
    f) compound names (with a hyphen of merging rural municipalities).

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[1] The Ministry of Finance of Estonia (https://www.rahandusministeerium.ee/en/objectivesactivities/local-governments-and-administrative-territorial-reform/administrative)
[2] Peeter Päll, 2018. The Changes Made to Place Names in the Course of the Administrative Reform, Collection of articles: Administrative reform 2017 in Estonia (https://haldusreform.fin.ee/static/sites/3/2019/01/lg_reform_eng_finale_screen.pdf)

The process of approving the name for a municipality involved also the Place Names Board, the opinion of which was 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 was taken as a basis but the municipalities in question were able to raise their objections and propose a new name.

During the reform the following problems regarding the names emerged:
1. inventing new names;
2. taking advantage of major and well-known place names;
3. applications to start from scratch;
4. 'making deals';
5. areas that were difficult to name;

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 places it was agreed that the name of the new rural municipality would not be based on the names of any of the merging municipalities and this often ruled out very reasonable name variants. The common name chosen for *Kõo, Kõpu, Suure-Jaani* and *Võhma* was the *Põhja-Sakala* rural municipality (*Sakala* is a reconstructed name of a historic division).

Another problem that occured during the process was 'making deals': it was said that in some places there was some kind of trading over the name of the municipality in the style of 'we will get the centre of the municipality, you will get the name'. This was not a rational choice of a name.

Also there were some areas that were a bit difficult to name. It happened among large merging regions that it was impossible to find suitable historic names.

In total, there were 51 voluntary mergers and government-initiated mergers. In 36 cases (71%) of these, the new municipality preserved the name of one of the merging rural municipalities or cities, in 4 cases the name was preserved together with a changed generic term (*Elva* city to *Elva* rural municipality; the same happened with *Tõrva, Mustvee* and *Valga* city).

In 11 cases (22%) a new name was given to the rural municipality (*Alutaguse, Hiiumaa, Järva, Kastre, Lääne-Harju, Lääneranna, Mulgi, Põhja-Pärnumaa, Põhja-Sakala, Saaremaa, Setomaa*).

Lääneranna is a completely new name, the rest are based on existing place names.

As mentioned above, there were certain recommendations that the Place Names Board gave for mergers to propose a name. Below is an overview of the division of the names of merged municipalities[3] (figure 1):

- names of parishes and old rural municipalities: *Anija, Antsla, Haljala, Häädemeeste, Jõgeva, Kambja, Kanepi, Kehtna, Lääne-Nigula, Lüganuse, Märjamaa, Otepää, Peipsiääre, Põltsamaa, Põlva, Rakvere, Rapla, Rõuge, Räpina, Saarde, Saue, Tartu, Toila, Tori, Viljandi, Viru-Nigula, Võru, Väike-Maarja* (in total 28);
- names of centres: *Elva, Haapsalu city, Mustvee, Narva-Jõesuu city, Paide city, Pärnu city, Tapa, Tartu city, Tõrva, Türi, Valga, Vinni* (12);
- prominent names (of natural features) in the territory of merging rural municipalities (including names of regions); *Alutaguse, Hiiumaa, Järva, Mulgi, Saaremaa, Setomaa* (6);
- county names containing a compass point: *Lääne-Harju, Põhja-Pärnumaa, Põhja-Sakala* (3);
- new names: *Lääneranna* (1);
- compound names of merging rural municipalities: none;
- unclassified: *Kastre*

[3] Peeter Päll, 2018. The Changes Made to Place Names in the Course of the Administrative Reform, Collection of articles: Administrative reform 2017 in Estonia (https://haldusreform.fin.ee/static/sites/3/2019/01/lg_reform_eng_finale_screen.pdf)

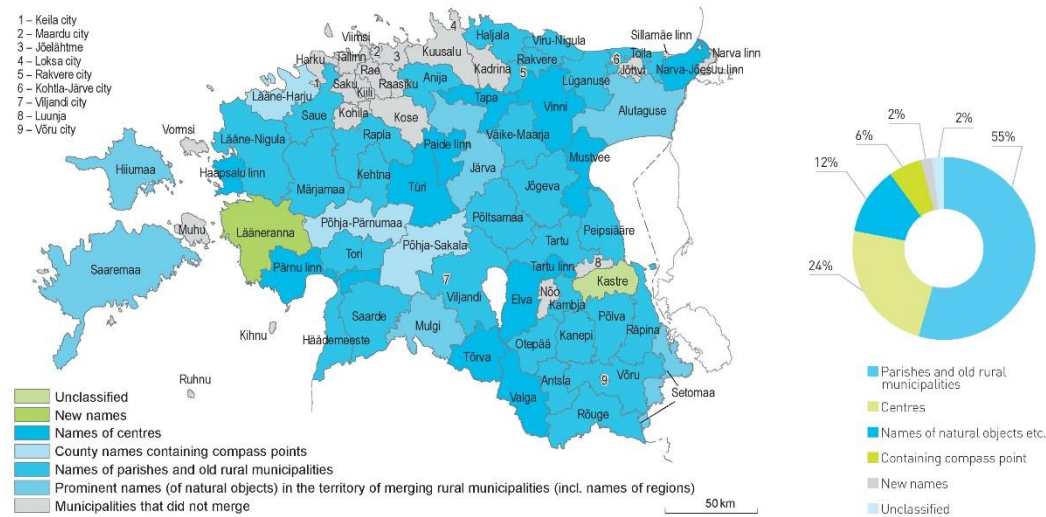The classification of the choice of names by post-merger municipalities

Figure 1.

Changes to village names

Together with the merger of municipalities there was also a need to rename some of the populated places (villages) as there can be no identical names of populated places within one municipality. This took place before the final stage of the reform in October 2017. As one solution, the Place Names Board 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. There were too many *Liivakülas*, *Metsakülas*, *Mõisakülas* and so on in Estonia and many of them happened to be in one and the same new rural municipality. The main reason why there cannot be identical names within one municipality is related to safety. When one needs a fire brigade or an ambulance, the misleading names might produce grave consequences.

The Place Names Board gave recommendations on how to change the names of the villages that had the same name. One solution, as mentioned above, was to complement the repeating names with a qualifying attribute. For example, with the name of the respective former manor, the name of a merging rural municipality, or in some cases the name of a neighbouring village.

In total there were 50 changes in village names, 31 in *Saaremaa* and 9 in *Võrumaa*. The reason why the biggest island of Estonia, *Saaremaa* had most of the changes is simple – the whole *Saaremaa* was one merging region.
Most of the names that needed to be changed acquired a qualifying attribute, this was either the name of a parish or a rural municipality, including an old manor municipality (*Kaarma-Jõe,*

Kihelkonna-Liiva, Laitsna-Hurda, Pöide-Keskvere, Püha-Kõnnu, Pühalepa-Harju, Rõuge-Matsi, Valjala-Ariste). There were also cases using the name of a region (*Sõrve-Hindu*), the name of a neighbouring village (*Kaali-Liiva, Rootsi-Aruküla, Vaigu-Rannaküla*) or using another name (*Kahrila-Mustahamba* after the historical village of *Kahrila*). Another possibility that was used was restoring an earlier form of a name. A minor change was made with *Salevere* village, the name was simply changed to *Salavere*, but in this case the Place Names Board recommended to change the name once again because it had misleading similarity with another Salevere village. In some names, the qualifying attributes Suur (great) and Väike (small) were used.

In several cases, the option was to alter a name, by adding to it a new element (in doing so *Laheküla* was changed to *Allikalahe*, *Liiva* to *Liivaranna, Nõmme* to *Liivanõmme*, *Rannaküla* to *Kirderanna* and *Laevaranna,* and *Veere* to *Veeremäe*) or by changing a part of a name (*Väljaküla* was changed to *Väljamõisa* and *Nõmme* to *Nõmjala).*

In some cases a completely different name was introduced, such as the name of a natural object (*Laheküla* was changed to *Tirbi* and *Rannaküla* to *Rooglaiu)*, a parallel name of a village (*Kallaste* was changed to *Vodi*) or the name of a group of farms (*Metsaküla* was changed to *Lussu* and *Pulli* to *Põdrametsa).*

Conclusion

All in all, we are satisfied with the names of municipalities after the administrative-territorial reform in Estonia. Most of the Place Names Board expert recommendations were taken into account by decision makers. We also have to admit that after the reform we could notice only one case where the local government has initiated the change of the municipality name and where the name issue has led to a greater community debate.

Regarding village names, it seems that the local communities are satisfied with the changes of village names and there are not any significant issues. After the reform the Place Names Board has also taken note of some misleadingly similar village names and given further recommendations to local governments on changing these names. We can say that without doubt the reform process was instructive and gave us some new experience for the future.