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The role of language and religion in Estonian Tatar identity-building

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HISTORY

In memory of Timur Seifullen (1950–2020)

Abstract: *Today less than 2,000 Tatars live in Estonia. The basis of their identity as Tatars are the language and the Islamic faith. The end of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century were favourable times for the Estonian Tatar community and children's Sunday and summer schools; drama societies and choirs were active in the capital and other northeastern towns of Estonia. The activities were a unique cultural phenomenon in the Lutheran and Estonian-speaking environment: a Muslim minority thriving, preserving and developing its culture while cooperating with the wider Tatar diaspora around the Baltic Sea. The uniqueness existed also in the details – Tatar children studied already in the 1920s geography, religion and their own language in Arabic script. The Narva Islamic Congregation's imam was also the leader of a local Tatar drama society.*

After the imposed standstill in the Soviet period from the 1940s to the 1980s, the Tatar community in Estonia revived in the 1990s. The grandchildren of the so-called pre-Soviet generation restored the Tatar Culture Society and Estonian Islamic Congregation in Tallinn. The immigration policy of the Soviet regime had however changed the balance in the Tatar community. Although religion remains a basic key to Tatar identity, the role of the language is different now. Today Tatar children study religion in Tallinn and Maardu using Russian language and Tatar teaching materials in Cyrillic or Latin script. The generation from the pre-Soviet period has also transferred the responsibility for preserving the Tatar language and Islamic religion to the new generation whose background, education and experience reflect twenty-first century Estonian and European realities. This study is based on extensive interviews with Tatars and discusses the language situation during the past century.

Keywords: *Tatars, Estonia, Islam, language, identity, family*

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Estonya Tatar kimlik inşasında dilin ve dinin rolü

Timur Seifullen'in anısına (1950–2020)

Özet: *Bugün Estonya'da 2.000'den biraz daha az sayıda Tatar yaşamaktadır. Bu kişilerin Tatar kimliklerinin temeli dil ve İslam inancıdır. On dokuzuncu yüzyılın sonu ve yirminci yüzyılın başları, Estonya Tatar topluluğu için iyi zamanlardı; çocukların Pazar günleri ve yaz dönemindeki okulları, tiyatro toplulukları ve koroları başkentte ve Estonya'nın diğer kuzeydoğu kasabalarında aktifti. Bu durum, Lutheran ve Estonca konuşulan ortamda benzersiz bir kültürel olguydu: Bir yandan Baltık Denizi çevresinde daha geniş yer tutan Tatar diasporası ile işbirliği yaparken, diğer yandan kültürünü geliştiren, koruyan ve geliştiren Müslüman bir azınlık vardı. Özgünlüğü ayrıntılarda da mevcuttu: Tatar çocukları 1920'lerde coğrafya, din ve dillerini Arap harfleriyle okudular. Narva İslami Cemaati'nin imamı aynı zamanda yerel bir Tatar tiyatro topluluğunun başıydı.*

1940'lardan 1980'lere kadar Sovyet döneminde dayatılan duraklamanın ardından Estonya'daki Tatar topluluğu yeniden canlandı. Sovyet öncesi olarak adlandırılan neslin torunları, Tallin'deki Tatar Kültür Derneği'ni ve Estonya İslam Cemaatini yeniden canlandırdı. Ancak Sovyet rejiminin göç politikası Tatar topluluğu içindeki dengeleri değiştirmişti. Din, Tatar kimliğinin temel unsuru olmaya devam etse de, dilin rolü değişti. Bugün Tatar çocukları, Tallin ve Maardu'da Rus dilini ve Kiril veya Latin alfabesiyle yazılan öğretim materyallerini kullanarak din eğitimi almaktadır. Sovyet öncesi dönemden gelen nesil, Tatar dilini ve İslam dinini koruma sorumluluğunu; geçmişi, eğitimi ve deneyimi şimdiden yirmi birinci yüzyıl Estonya gerçeklerini yansıtan yeni nesle devretti. Tatarlarla yapılan kapsamlı görüşmelere dayanan bu çalışma, geçtiğimiz yüzyıldaki dil durumunu tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Tatarlar, Estonya, İslam, dil, kimlik, aile*

The Estonian Tatar community

Tatars have been a distinct and unique minority in Estonia for the past three centuries. The first few Tatars appeared already during the Livonian War (1558–1583) but a noteworthy settlement was created only in the eighteenth century. After the Great Northern War (1700–1721) several Tatars, mainly soldiers and naval officers discharged from the Russian army, stayed and purchased land in Tallinn, especially in an area which received the nickname the "Tatar Quarters". From the early nineteenth century a street was called *Tatarstraße* 'Tatar Street' in German; today both *Tatari* and *Uus-Tatari* 'New-Tatar' streets exist (Abiline 2008: 60; see also Abiline & Ringvee 2016).

The second wave of Tatars, merchants and peddlers, arrived in Tallinn and especially Narva during the second half of the nineteenth century. The growth of the permanent settlement is confirmed by the establishment of separate Muslim graveyards in Narva, Rakvere and Tallinn (Au & Ringvee 2007: 122). At the the beginning of World War I the Tatar community in Estonia is roughly estimated to a couple of thousand members (Ahmetov & Nisamedtinov 1999: 449). After the establishment of the Estonian Republic in 1918, Tatars rented in Tallinn and bought in Narva capacious rooms for community and prayer halls (Abiline 2007: 11). During World War I, the War of Independence (1918–1920) and also during World War II, many Tatars fled from Estonia to Finland, Sweden and Germany (Abiline 2008: 68; Ståhlberg & Svanberg 2016: 147–149).

According to a national census, the number of Estonian Tatars in the 1930s was only a few hundred (Abiline 2007: 15). The Tatar communities were active, however: in Narva (1928) and Tallinn (1940) Islamic congregations were registered and Sunday schools arranged for children (Au & Ringvee 2007: 122). Tatar history, traditions, religion and geography were taught in their own language; music and drama societies were also active. The leader and organiser of the cultural activities in Narva was Zinnätulla Seifullin (1887–1966), chairman and long-term imam of the Narva Islamic Congregation. His grandson, Timur Seifullen, re-establisher of the Tatar Cultural Society and the Estonian Islamic Congregation in Tallinn (1988), remembered in several interviews the impact of these Sunday school and language lessons on his family and the Tatar community in general. The Tatar-language education provided one of the keystones for building an Estonian Tatar identity (Seifullen 2015, 2017).

Tatars from Tallinn spent their holidays in Narva-Jõesuu where Tatar-language summer schools were arranged. Among others Alimzhan (Alimcan) Idris (1887–1959) from Germany and Arif Rami (1895–1971) from Finland were invited as teachers (Abiline 2008: 70). The contacts with the Finnish Tatar community remained strong until the beginning of World War II and the Soviet occupation of Estonia. Timur Seifullen remembered:

> *We got along nicely [with the Tatars from Finland]. In 1939 during the summer we still had a big festivity together in Narva, it was a joint celebration. Then the next year it was planned to take place in Helsinki, but in [the autumn of 19]39 the war began and military bases [were installed in Estonia] and the war [was upon us]… and it was all broken to pieces.*
> (Seifullen 20.11.2015)

During the Soviet period from the 1940s until the end of the 1980s cultural autonomy and religious freedom were repressed. The Tatars in Estonia also witnessed the arrival of a new wave of secularised (or so they perceived the newcomers) and mainly Russian-speaking Tatars. Until World War II the local Estonian Islamic community had consisted solely of Sunni Muslim Tatars. After the war, the Soviet immigration policy brought in also Muslims from Central Asian and Caucasian republics, among them Shia Azeri. Both the Muslim and Tatar communities grew significantly. According to the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic national censuses, the Tatar population living mainly in Tallinn and nearby industrial areas increased as follows:

1959	**1970**	**1979**	**1989**
1,535	2,205	3,195	4,058

(Loog 2017: 34)

The Soviet regime was atheist, imposed the Russian language as the universal communication means all over the USSR and implemented strict control on public activities. The Tatars in Estonia however continued to practise their cultural and religious traditions at home and in private circles (Ringvee 2005: 243). In the late 1980s the national re-awakening in Estonia also encouraged the minorities to (re-)establish and express their identities publicly. In 1988 the *Tatar Culture Society* was founded in Tallinn and registered parallel with the restoration of the *Estonian Islamic Congregation*.

The society began to arrange social events and (re-)created contacts with Tatar communities around the Baltic Sea. The community also looked towards Kazan and Ufa for religious education and for the congregation's imam. A Sunday school for children was started by Isljär Magdeyeva (Abiline 2008: 78). The adults gathered for common prayers and traditional celebrations. Those present at the meetings in the late 1980s and in early 1990s recalled that one of the most important expectations and joys of these events was the possibility of speaking freely in their own language again (Seifullen 20.11.2015; I.A. 10.11.2017). In the early 1990s, 20–30 Tatars gathered regularly in Tallinn under the supervision of Ali Harassov who had completed his Islamic studies in Ufa. The group studied Islamic teachings, the Arabic language and *Qur'an* reading in Tatar (I.A. 10.11.2017).

A Tatar ABC book in Cyrillic script from Tatarstan, used for Tatar language education in Estonia

The following decades brought several new challenges to the community. The most important was maybe that the number of Tatars in Estonia decreased. According to the national censuses the numbers fell from more than 4,000 at the end of the Soviet era to 2,582 in 2000 and to 1,993 in 2011. Tatar cultural societies, very active in the 1990s in Tallinn, Narva, Kohtla-Järve and Maardu, are today struggling to survive as they lack both financial support and enthusiastic young volunteers. The older and formerly active members of the societies observe less interest in communal activities among the younger generations.

The "younger" Tatars (up to 50–60 years old) often maintain their Muslim faith as an essential attribute of their national identity and many are also able to speak the Tatar language with their parents (see article on the Estonian Tatar family language policies by M. Iqbal, in this issue).

Those who were born in Estonia are however less capable of reading and writing in the Tatar language (I.A. 10.11.2017). Today the Tatar Sunday schools are still active in Maardu and Tallinn. According to Iman Liya Mahmutova, the head of the Tatar Sunday school *Nur* 'Light' and the wife of the imam of the Estonian Islamic Congregation, the teachers of the Sunday schools in Maardu and Tallinn are young and capable women. One of them has just arrived from Tatarstan where she completed her pedagogical training (Mahmutova 08.04.2021).[1]

Teaching Tatar as native language

Before the 1940s, the Tatars conducting Sunday and summer schools in Narva and in Narva-Jõesuu kept and taught the traditional Arabic alphabet and orthography to the children and youth. Timur Seifullen remembered:

> *The Finnish Tatars took their congregational imam from Turkey and he taught them to write the Tatar language with the Latin alphabet. Also in Tatarstan from the 1920s to 1940 they*

1 All pictures in this article are from books used for Tatar language teaching. The photographs are kindly provided by Iman Liya Mahmutova.

> *wrote with Latin script. In the Sunday schools in Narva-Jõesuu the Tatar language was written with the Arabic alphabet. My aunt and father and grandfather could master it. It was so, because they had come here before the Latin alphabet reached Tatarstan.*
> (Seifullen 20.11.2015)

During the Soviet period the Tatars from other parts in the Soviet Union used the Cyrillic alphabet for learning prayers and to read the Tatar language books. A child of the generation arriving in Estonia during the late 1940s from the village of Andreyevka, southeast of Nizhny Novgorod, narrated:

> *Both my grandmothers were literate in the religious language [Arabic]; they could read the* Qur'an*. In Soviet times, after the reign of Stalin, the study of Islam was practically ended, and the next generations had to educate themselves with the help of a few old books, and there were also some old booklets. I have seen for myself that there were things [literature] written in the letters of the Russian [Cyrillic] alphabet.*
> (I.M. 10.11.2017)

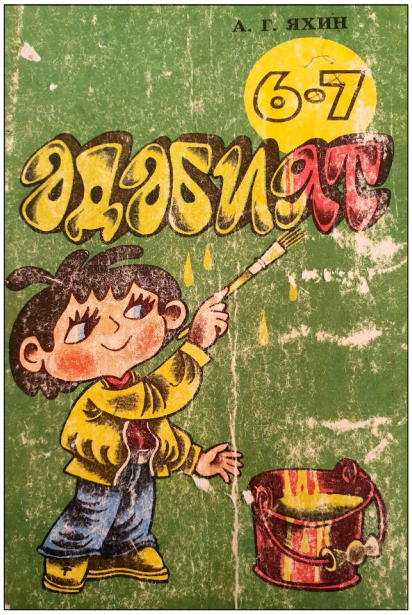
A Tatar, who arrived in Estonia in the 1980s and was active during the re-establishment of the Tatar cultural and religious societies lead by the "older" or pre-war generation, recounted:

> *The most lively time for us were the late 1980s and the 1990s; the cultural societies in Narva, Jõhvi, Kohtla-Järve, Maardu [were founded]… we celebrated* Qurban bayramı [Sacrifice feast] *and* Ramazan bayramı *together. In Tallinn we celebrated* Sabantuy [summer festival] *in June, several times in Pirita or at Schnell's park; around 200 people came. There were evenings of Tatar literature and music dedicated to Abdullah Tukay or Mussa Jalil [Musa Cälil]… and there was a* Novruz [New Year/Spring] *celebration in March. […] But the newspapers and books were read in the Tatar language only by those born there [outside Estonia]. Those born here [in Estonia] cannot read [the Tatar language] anymore. Nobody who is born here, sadly, reads the Tatar language.*
> (I.A. 10.11.2017)

In the 2010s the shift in the language use among the Tatars in Tallinn appeared to happen not only to the written but also to the spoken form:

> *The mufti from Turkey, he [always] wonders why Estonians, Russians and Azeri speak to each other in their own languages [during visits to the Islamic Cultural Centre in Tallinn], but Tatars*

speak Russian with each other. Well, it is no secret, the [Tatar] mufti speaks Russian at home. (T.S. 12.12.2015)



A literature schoolbook in Tatar with Cyrillic script

To this same shift in spoken and written language points a study of three Tatar-speaking families and their language practices, conducted in 2019 by Maria Iqbal in Tallinn and Maardu (Iqbal 2019).

The interviews focus on language strategies, beliefs, policy and management. They reveal that even though the parents and children see the maintenance of the Tatar language as beneficial, and the children feel a strong appreciation about being raised multilingually (Iqbal 2019: 67), they see the Tatar language mainly as a means for communication with the elderly family members and at home. When helping the children with school work the parents use Russian instead (Iqbal 2019: 43).

Apparently the historical background of the immigration waves affect the way the Tatars in Estonia today are able to and want to teach their children about traditions and language. First were those of the 1700s and 1800s, who established a Tatar- and an Estonian-speaking community. The post-war Soviet waves of the 1940s and 1970s (the latter for supplementing the work force for the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games facilities in Tallinn) introduced Russian-speaking Tatars, and finally, after the collapse of the Soviet Union a decisive decrease and ageing of the community can be observed.

Modern books for Tatar language teaching in Latin script

Tatar education and identity

The head of the present-day Tatar Sunday schools, Iman Liya Mahmutova, arrived in Estonia first in 2003. She spent her childhood in Moscow and studied in Saudi Arabia. She admits that regardless of the everyday use of the Tatar language at home with her own children and memories of a Tatar home teacher from her childhood, this is far from sufficient for a good and versatile instruction for Tatar children. The teachers in the Sunday school are Tatar women who have received their education in Kazan, Tatarstan (Mahmutova 08.04.2021). Their language differs from the local Mishar Tatar spoken by the "old" Tatars.

The poem Tugan tel*, 'Native language' by Abdulla Tukay, in Cyrillic script, from the Tatar ABC book*

The materials used at the school vary, depending on the topic of instruction and on the group of students. Estonian-speaking Tatars do not know the Russian alphabet, so some materials used are in the Latin script and others use the Cyrillic script. In the case of the younger group of children aged 8–11 years, learning is often conducted in the form of games, singing songs, making traditional handicrafts and learning by heart short poems in Tatar.

The older group (aged 12–16) works with thematic vocabulary (weather, seasons, family, etc.) and studies grammar and Tatar literature. Every school year ends traditionally with a concert for the parents and friends with the recital of poems, music, songs and a smaller theatrical performance.

An interesting change has occurred in Estonia over a few generations: a century ago young Tatars using the Arabic script studied in their own language Islamic teachings in Narva and Narva-Jõesuu. Today in Tallinn at the Islamic Centre young Tatars study the Arabic language in Russian. They also learn to write the Arabic script and to read the *Qur'an*. The choice and use of the spoken language was something essential and it had even a defining value to the older generation of Tatars in Estonia (the descendants of the pre-war migrants):

All the beginnings of all these societies… The absolute first [and most important] thing was the fact that our own people could come together and speak in our language. […] and if I speak of Tatars, then I speak of these ["old"] Tatars. There are also Tatars [in Estonia] I don't speak so much about because I cannot talk about them much. […] With very many Tatars I am forced to communicate only in Russian.
(Seifullen 21.07.2017)

A modern version of the Tatar poet Abdulla Tukay's most popular poems, including Tatar, Russian and English

Russification of the Tatar language is one of the main issues older Estonian Tatars worry about. After conducting 18 interviews among Estonian Tatars, Maarja Klaas concluded in her study: "Here the status of Mishar [Tatar] is lower than that of Kazan Tatar, while being able to de-Russify one's speech (whatever the dialect) is valued most. For many, speaking Tatar is the key element of being Tatar." (Klaas 2015: 17)

A common interpretation for the choice of spoken language is concurrent among most of the Tatars and the community of immigrants with former Soviet Central Asian or Caucasian and Islamic background:

> *Well, in the 1890s they came here, the grandfathers of Timur [Seifullen] and those like him, and they were religious people who have preserved their faith until today.*

They are the first generation [of Tatars in Estonia] and their descendants and those in Finland have also retained their religion and language until today. They preserve the Tatar language well. Then the new generation, those who came during the Soviet era… their children don't speak Tatar any longer. Those who came from Russia can't make it [use the language] anymore.
(F.H. 07.05.2017)

Preserving Tatar culture and Islamic faith

In his book 'Islam in Estonia' (*Islam Eestis*, 2008), while describing the development of the Estonian Islamic community, the historian Toomas Abiline argues that the basis for the Tatar identity is their language and religion. He conducted several interviews with the older Tatar community members in 2006 and 2007 and estimated that around 80% of the Tatars in Estonia spoke the Tatar language and about 15% were practising Muslims (Abiline 2008: 80).

The term "practising Muslim" in the case of Tatars living in Estonia has many different layers. The Tatars who arrived before the 1940s were integrated into the Lutheran or Orthodox religious majority society. They lived through the atheist Soviet political system which repressed religion until the end of the 1980s. Now they witness the arrival of new waves of much less moderate Muslim immigrants from North Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and elsewhere. For these newcomers Islam is an integral and essential part of society and their identity, and also a universal religion which should be promulgated outside their emigrant community. Some attempts have been made to characterise and compare the religiousness of the Estonian Tatars with new Muslim immigrants and Estonian converts to Islam (Lepa 2019a; 2019b and 2020). An analysis shows that the older Tatar generation looks upon its own religiousness with deep respect and at the same time with philosophical moderation and tolerance:

> *For us Tatars religion is always a matter of interpretation. We have not been such keen or too eager Muslims… not so good at observing the canons. We have traditions, thousands of years older than [this Islamic] religion.*
> (Seifullen 20.11.2015)

> *The thing that kept us together here [in Estonia], [I mean] us, the Tatars… it was all those religious celebrations. Those were the occasions when children were brought together to play, those were the events where we learned to know each other, and this is the only prism I have left [now] for communication with my deceased predecessors.*
> (Seifullen 21.07.2017)

The attitude towards Tatar cultural values and the regard for the Islamic faith might go hand in hand or in certain cases be mutually exclusive. Circumstances before the World War II created a situation where the imam Zinätulla Seifullin was also the organiser of the Tatar cultural activities and drama societies in Narva (Abiline 2008: 70). In the capital Tallinn the leaders of the Tatar congregation arranged gatherings where Tatar music, dances and songs were performed, and the choirs of elderly

men and younger members of the Tatar community were singing together (Abiline 2007: 30). After the Soviet period, Tatar cultural societies in Tallinn and elsewhere in northeast Estonia restored the tradition of celebrating not only the religious festivities of *Qurban* and *Ramadan*, but also the *Novruz* and *Sabantuy* festivals. Some other efforts, such as the attempts to restore the drama society, however collided with the differing views of the imam in the Tallinn Islamic Congregation. Religion was suddenly something one cannot present on the scene:

> *I remember the time around 15 years ago, when I wanted to present a very popular play which had been on stage in Kazan for 25 years. I had in mind to invite even the author of the play through the Estonian Ministry of Culture, and then… then Ali-hazrat [the imam] gave the order after the Friday* namaz *[prayer] that no one could go to the play since it makes fun about our sacred religion.*
> (F.H. 07.05.2017)

The line between accepted and inappropriate activities has been and still is a delicate one for the religious leaders of the community. The celebration of *Novruz*, for instance, positions itself very close to this line:

> *Well, this mufti of ours, imam Ali, he does not approve of us celebrating* Novruz*, since it is not a religious but a heathen festivity, yet he participates in it himself every time and his family, too, so… the nationality matters after all.*
> (I.A. 10.11.2017)

It seems that religion today inside the Tatar community is not the matter of interpretation anymore because of changes in the Estonian and especially Muslim social contexts and attitudes to Muslims and Islam. But if there is a will, there still exists a way to continue with the more than century-old tradition of Tatar Sunday school with non-religious elements. When six years ago the Sunday school *Nur* started offering lessons in the Islamic Centre building in Tallinn, Tatar folk songs and poetry were a natural, traditional and much expected part of the education. Iman Liya Mahmutova has taught the lessons on Islamic studies for children of the members of the Estonian Islamic Congregation since she arrived in Estonia. When she established *Nur*, lessons took place on Sundays in the congregation premises. Soon the cultural lessons apparently moved beyond the line of the traditional and religious activities. In order to avoid dancing and singing in the house where the mosque is situated, the school started to rent rooms elsewhere in city, among others on the premises of the University of Tallinn or from the Azerbaijani cultural society (Mahmutova 08.04.2021).

Conclusions

The Tatar language and the Islamic faith are the pillars of Tatar ethnic identity in Estonia. The Tatar community is small in numbers; its ability to maintain and continue to transmit the Tatar language and preserve the ethnic identity and religion has for the past century depended much on the leaders of the community and on the political circumstances. Before World War II the circumstances were favourable and Tatar Sunday and summer schools instructed the students in religious and secular matters using the Arabic alphabet for writing in Tatar. The members of the cultural organisations and also congregations, as well as their leaders and guests especially from Finland, took an active part in organising and participating in traditional celebrations and events.

The Soviet occupation of Estonia in 1940 put a stop to most religious and language activities. After the end of the Soviet period in the 1990s, the grandchildren of the pre-war generation re-established Tatar cultural societies to preserve the language and culture and the Estonian Islamic Congregation to maintain the Islamic religion. Today speaking Tatar is still a key element of being Tatar and the basis for the Tatar identity, but many Estonian Tatar families use a mixture of Russian and Tatar or Estonian and Tatar as their vocabulary in Tatar is limited.

The imam of the Estonian Islamic Congregation is still a Tatar, yet because of an increasing amount of Estonian converts and new Muslim immigrants with other views on Islam, the congregation is quickly becoming more multinational than Tatar. The former focus on Tatar traditions is not any longer the priority; now more universal Islamic doctrines are practised in the congregation. The leaders of the Tatar community in Tallinn and Maardu keep the Sunday schools alive and even when the younger generation's Tatar language skills are not very high, the language education the children get is an important instrument for maintaining the Tatar language communication with the older relatives and within families.

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Tel digän därya bar,
belgännär çumıp alır,
belmägännär korı kalır.
There is a river called Language,
those who know can dive into it,
the others remain on the shore.
Tatar mäkale / proverb