

EDITORIAL IMPRESSIONS: RURAL REBELLION AND RECLAIMING DREAMS

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The rural rebellion* is a meaningful legacy of keeping dreams alive. It involves any persistence, revival or renewal in locations where the masses of urban dwellers project backwardness, decline, and old-fashioned things. Rural communities have a heritage on their own and it does not belong to the past.

Humans have created ideologies and weapons that can influence individuals and whole communities after their active or original use and can occasionally have a profound and long-term effect on everyday life (Bendix 2025). But human lives and communal cultural legacy are not threatened only by war and bombs. The destruction can also be invisible. It comes from the triumph of homogeneity, which can have such a negative effect on minority communities and languages.

Rebelling against the uniformity dictated by a city involves the desire to get back one's language, heritage and history. If the pressure of transformation is especially high, as it was in Estonia during the Soviet period, maintenance of traditions and revitalising heritage appeared as challenges to the political mainstream (Saarlo et al. 2025: ii). Pressure turns all kinds of local initiatives into resistance. Today, rural areas in Estonia (including the traditional areas of minorities like the Seto) are emptying and people moving to urban centres, especially to the capital city Tallinn, where one third of the Estonian population lives. However, there is also something appealing in rural peripheries and some people move (back) to countryside.

Language has a significant potential in supporting communities' self-esteem, pride and legacy. Local language is a group indicator in a wider sense than simply a communication tool for regional communities. Language also empowers other domains of local life, makes it distinct, gives special disposition to everyday practices and cultural experience. Halting a community's language threatens its distinctiveness and existence as a unique group. This leads to an overall decrease of cultural diversity. Language shift or loss makes traditional minorities increasingly endangered.

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This decline is not straightforward or unescapable. At some point, people who still know the language or remember some features of it (even the younger generations) may start repossessing their heritage and language. The emerging technological opportunities and digital toolsets might not only facilitate homogeneity but also provide opportunities for heritage and language enthusiasts.

The usual is considered natural. Every step that deviates from the common is a rebellion. One can even think further and find that keeping your own heritage and language turns out to be the insurrection. How did stability become a nonconformity? This has happened slowly, invisibly, unlike a bombing, which changes lives instantly. Heritage and dialects became a deviation, an inconsistency that is apart from normal life. Local artisans and story tellers appear to the town dwellers as curiosities.

Return cannot happen spontaneously; or can it? People move back to language and heritage in a particular or generalised sense. Movement is mutual, languages and other cultural practices that have emerged locally appear now in different places. It is a drive between cultural registers and scenarios.

The heterogeneous pressure of homogenisation is very hard, but some still value the peculiarities that enable the need for the coherence of a rural dream. But perhaps collective consistency is not needed? Perhaps it is enough to have some individuals who manage to avoid the pressure? There must be some inner desire, knowledge, awareness, possibility, something to build on, to proceed from, to rely on. These individuals can be harder to detect and target by the agents of sameness.

In the case of language, this can be based on the peculiarities of articulation, intonation, the way words are emphasised, but also on remembered or recorded words in archives or databases. It can be possible to awaken the vague, to bring out the forgotten. There are also those who never speak but know something. Often, however, it is not far from the need to conjure something out of nothingness.

In years gone by minorities were required to have crystal purity, perfection, holistic evidence of authenticity. The common could be more or less arbitrary, but not a minority. Now we see changing perceptions of what is renewable, how it aligns with broader social dynamics. What is lost is not necessarily lost forever.

However, it is complicated to tell whether all this make much sense. Will revitalisation of language and heritage lead anywhere? Can we actually help communities in the process? Perhaps, if we stay close enough. But the process remains much more obscure if we cannot access the people.

I have studied the Komi Indigenous minority in the Russia North over the last three decades. The Komi belong to the network of Finno-Ugric peoples and are distant language relatives of the Estonians. I visited the Komi every year since the mid-1990s, but the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian war against Ukraine have ended my annual trips. I am gradually losing any culturally intimate understanding of Komi life and any connection to shared knowledge and feelings (see Leete 2020: i). Therefore, I cannot claim to have immediate comprehension of the situation among the Komi people. But I can still rely on available data and memory, and conduct a secondary qualitative analysis (Heaton 2008) of group dynamics among them.

The Komi region I have visited most often, Kulömdin district, has been distinguished during the post-Soviet era as the most slowly developing part of the Komi Republic. Unemployment in the district is the highest among the Komi regions, and local inhab-

itants' income is the lowest. The agricultural sector has practically disappeared, and cattle breeding and potato cultivation are limited to individual households. In many villages there are basically no job opportunities. This means that the life of the district's population is not particularly enviable.

However, the people here are very proud of their historical and cultural legacy. They claim that their language is the most correct one, with "no deviations" (the Komi literary language is based on the dialect spoken in the region). They are the biggest of all the Komi groups and the district has the highest share of Indigenous people compared to other Komi areas. People here consider themselves *chik komi mort* ('the real Komi people' in Komi). My friend argued that without people from Kulömdin "this people will disappear" (Leete and Koosa 2012: 173). A hundred years ago, when the Komi autonomous oblast was established, local intellectuals even proposed that Kulömdin village should become the capital of Komi territories instead of Syktyvkar. This indicates that the self-perception of the local Komi as exclusive is not a recent invention.

As we see in the case of Kulömdin, internal pride and external image do not go hand in hand at all. The problem with the Komi image is more one of principal and extends to the entire Komi population. They have long been considered the most Russified among the Finno-Ugric peoples and as those who have preserved their Finno-Ugric heritage the least (Sirelius 1998 [1907]: 122, 175, 177; see also Sharapov 1998: 116–117).

The simulacrum of decline of many Indigenous communities has been reproduced by the official censuses in Russia. The last Russian population census from 2020 created an especially dramatic picture of the extinction of the Finno-Ugric minorities. The Komi were a very distinct example, as according to the census one-third of them disappeared over one year, compared to a statistical estimate from 2019.

There were several reported violations of good practice relating to that census. The census staff visited only one third of the inhabitants of the Komi Republic, and most of the data were produced on the basis of the population register. In this way, it was complicated to estimate who could consider themselves Komi and claim any knowledge of the native language. Although some of my colleagues have given up using the last census data as completely unreliable, others still use it, arguing that this is the only evidence we have. Surely, discriminative language policy and language shift, restrictions of Komi autonomy and assimilation do their job. But the official decline has been too rapid to be even close to the truth.

As I have not had any experience in the field since the late 2010s, I am not able to confront the official evidence with my personal impressions. But it is still true that those who have had something might still lose it. Manipulating official census data is an effective mode of creating an impression of accelerated regress.

Without any reliable evidence of collapse or development we feel pity for the Indigenous minorities. At the same time, we have lost touch and are not able to provide serious counter-arguments. We simply do not know the truth.

There are many ways to reclaim rural dreams. A return to the rural could work out if people want it creatively, if they enjoy the process. Scholars cannot reinforce the change, but we can support the communities we have even a tiny chance to approach.

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