

The Baltic Finnish peoples divided by state and administrative borders: territorial development of the Karelians, Vepsians, and Setos

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THE BALTIC FINNISH
PEOPLES DIVIDED
BY STATE
AND ADMINISTRATIVE
BORDERS:
TERRITORIAL
DEVELOPMENT
OF THE KARELIANS,
VEPSIANS, AND SETOS

A. Manakov*
N. Terenina*



Ethnocultural diversity of the Russian Federation is not only an important component of its historical heritage but also a significant resource for development. However, a number of ethnic groups are on the brink of extinction. The aim of this study is to investigate the impact of changes in state and administrative borders on the territorial and demographic development of small ethnic groups. The article analyses the case of three Baltic Finnish peoples living in the Russian North-West and divided by borders of different levels: Karelians (Finland, the Republic of Karelia, and the Leningrad and Tver regions), Vepsians (the Republic of Karelia and the Leningrad and Vologda regions), and Setos (Estonia and the Pskov region). The analysis is based on the cartographic and statistical demographic data, as well as the results of a complex expedition made in summer 2014 in the Pechory district of the Pskov region. The results of the study show that the assimilation of peoples divided as a result of migration and division of their ethnic territory by political borders takes place at an accelerated rate. The study makes it possible to formulate certain recommendations and improve the measures to maintain the language and culture of ethnic minorities of the Russian North-West.

Key words: ethnic territory, migration, Karelians, Vepsians, Setos

Studying the spatial development of small ethnic groups is an important research task seeking to understand the mechanisms of ethnic development and closely connected with the problem of sustaining ethnocultural diversity in Russia. The notion of a ‘geographically dispersed ethnic group’ is quite new to the geographical science. This category brings together ethnic groups with weakened ties and characterised by relatively autonomous development [1].

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The dispersion of ethnic groups can be a result of both migration followed by the formation of relatively isolated sub-ethnic groups within a new settlement area and the division of an ethnic group by state and administrative borders. In the latter case, the ethnic group remains within its ethnic area, however, the ethnocultural development of its parts astride the border differs being affected by a number of factors.

Historically, the settlement area of the Baltic Finnish peoples living in the European north of Russia (the Karelians, the Vepsians and the Setos) was divided by borders of different levels. As a result, relatively isolated settlement regions developed within the original area. Geographical dispersion led to the development of sub-ethnic groups on the verge of extinction.

The Karelians belong to the north group of the Baltic Finnish peoples who are linguistically related to the neighbouring Finns. Karelian believers — unlike Finns who converted to Protestantism under the Swedish rule — are Orthodox Christians.

There are numerous names of the ethnic groups used by Karelians: *karjalaizet* (general), *karjalani* (in Karelia, used by the speakers of the main dialect of the Karelian language, which is the closest to Finnish), *livviköit* (in the Lake Ladoga area, used by the speakers of the Livvi dialect), *lüüdiköit* (the Lake Onega area, speakers of the Lude dialect) [1].

According to the 2010 census, the number of Karelians in Russia is 60.8 thousand people [4]; three fourths (45.6 thousand) live in the Republic of Karelia. Moreover, a significant part of Karelians (7.4 thousand people or 12% of the Russian Karelian population) lives in the Tver region, where they refer to themselves as Tver Karelians (*tverin karielazet*).

The Karelians developed in the first half of the first millennium AD from the indigenous population of the south of modern Karelia and South-East Finland. The *Korela* of Russian 9th century chronicles populated the northern and north-western shores of Lake Ladoga (the Karelian Isthmus) [5]. The turn of the millennium forged close connections between the Karelian and Finnish tribes living in the South-East of modern Finland. In this period, the tribe of Izhorians separated from Karelians, which is considered a proof of the existence of a Karelian tribal alliance at the time [6].

Moving to the East, the Karelians merged with the ancestors of Vepsians (Vesi). Today, the Livvi dialect of the Karelian language — a result of the Vepsian-Karelian contact — is spoken on the north-eastern shore of Lake Ladoga and the Olonets Isthmus. The Karelians living to the west from Lake Onega speak the Lude dialect (fig. 1). Many researchers believe that this dialect also has the Vepsian substratum.

In the 11—12th centuries, migrating to the north, the Karelians populated the eastern part of modern Finland and the western part of Karelia. Later, they moved further to the north, where they merged with the Sami. A proof of this contact is the Lapp features in the appearance of the Northern Karelians [5].

As early as the 12th century, the Karelians were mentioned as subjects of the Novgorod Republic. Since then, the Karelians have been an independent ethnic group with an original material and spiritual culture [6].

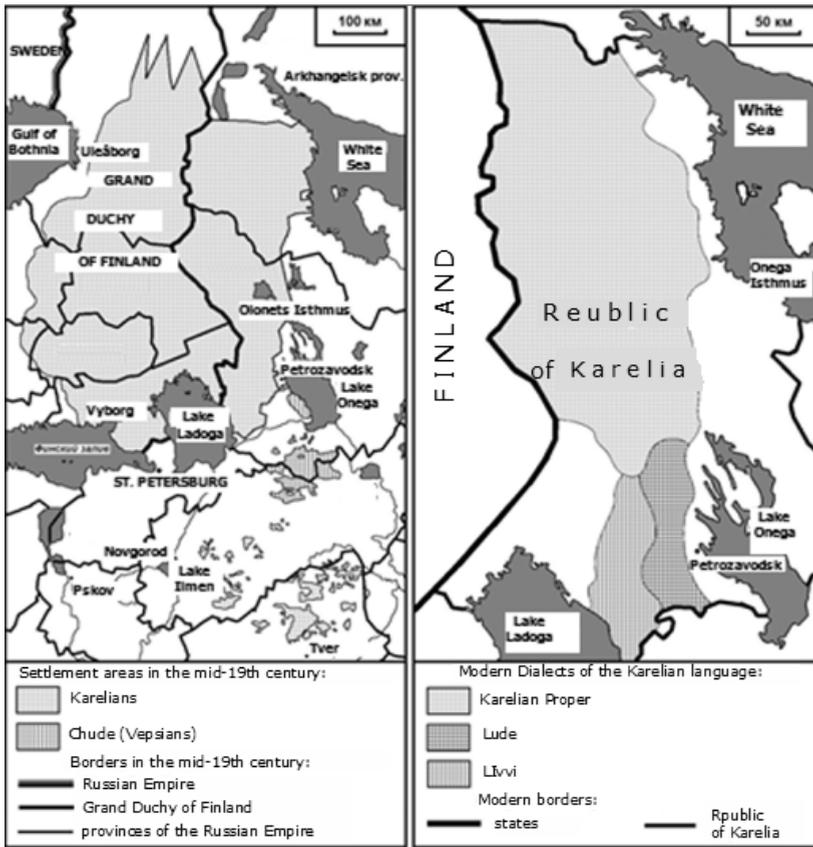


Fig. 1. Areas of Karelian settlement in the mid-19th century in today's Republic of Karelia [14; 16]

In 1323, Sweden and the Novgorod Republic signed the Treaty of Nöteborg establishing a border, which would divide modern Finland in half, from the mouth of the Neva in the South to the Gulf of Bothnia in the North. The border drawn in 1595 by the Treaty of Teusina resembled the modern state border between Finland and Russia [12]. As the map compiled by P. Köppen in the mid-19th century [16]. (fig.1) shows, almost all territories to the east from the border that divided the Swedish and Novgorod (later, the Muscovite State) domains until the end of the 16th century belong to the area of Karelian settlement.

The East of Finland is home to numerous descendants of Karelians who partook in the formation of the Finnish nation. However, it is impossible to identify their number, since most of them are considered Finns. The number of Finnish citizens of Karelian descent is estimated at 550,000—2,000,000 people [21].

In the 17th century, the Karelian ethnic territory split in two isolated areas. This was a result of the Treaty of Stolbovo (1617), according to which Sweden gained Karelian Uyezd. Under the rule of a different state, the local

residents were subject to religious and economic oppression. Defiance of Protestantism and high taxes triggered mass migration of Karelians to inland Russia.

Historians estimate that, at the end of the 16th century, the total number of Karelians (including those living in Swedish Finland) reached 60,000 people.

In the 17th century, up to 50,000 Karelians left their homeland; from 30,000 to 40,000 settled in inland Russian regions [1]. Approximately 30,000 people moved to the Novgorod and Tver lands. Less than 5,000 Orthodox Karelians remained in the Karelian Uyezd, which was incorporated into Sweden [2].

From the 17th until mid-20th century, the Tver Karelians accounted for a major part of the Karelian ethnic group outnumbering their counterparts living in Karelia. However, the Tver Karelians were significantly affected by assimilation in the 20th century. If the number of Karelians living in modern Karelia decreased 2.4-fold in 1936—2010 (from 108.6 to 45.6 thousand people), the number of Tver Karelians reduced 19-fold in 1926—2010 (from 140.6 to 7.4 thousand people) [1; 4] (fig. 2).

The territory of Karelian settlement in the modern Tver region is called Tver Karelia. The Karelians settled there in the lands abandoned by the Russian population in the late 16th/early 17th century, during the Time of Troubles and Polish-Lithuanian intervention. Thus, the areas of Karelian settlement were located at significant distances from great rivers and trade routes (fig. 3).

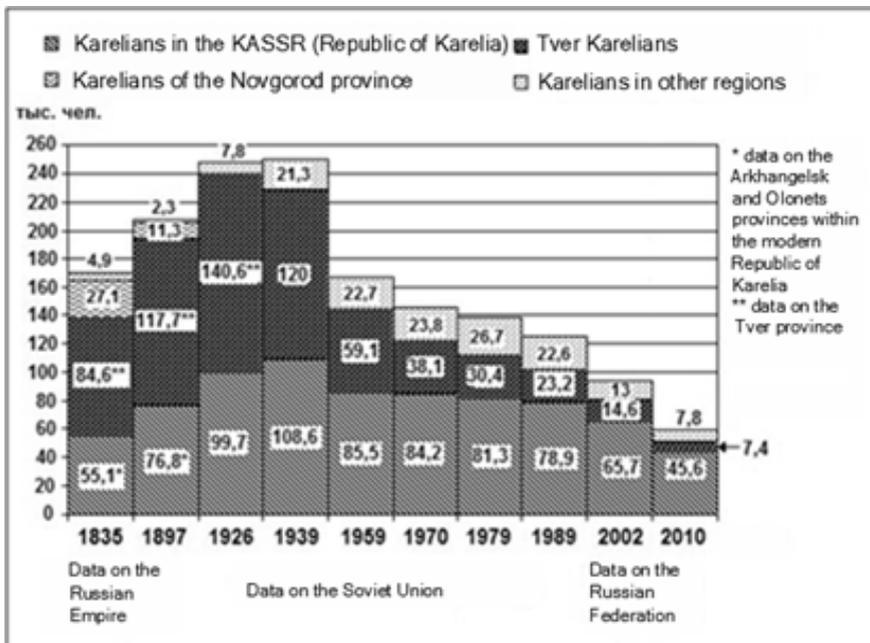


Fig. 2. Changes in the number of Karelians in the Russian Federation, the USSR, and the Russian Federation in 1835—2010 [1, p. 10; 4]

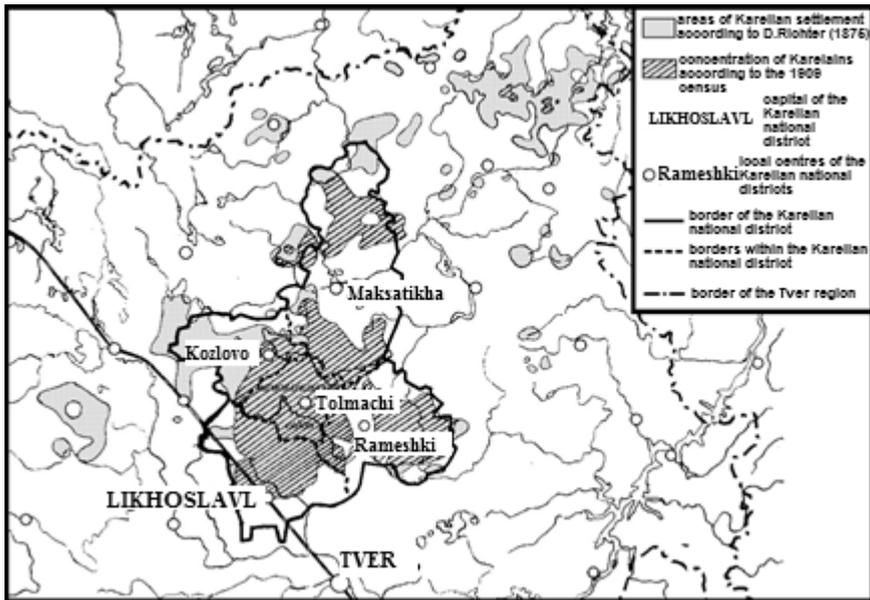


Fig. 3. Areas of Karelian settlement in the Tver region and the borders of the Karelian national district (1937—1939) [1, p. 15]

In 1937—1939, the Karelian national district was established within the Kalinin region, where a lot was done to preserve and develop the Karelian language. However, today, the sub-ethnic group of Tver Karelians is on the verge of extinction. The future of Tver Karelia largely depends on the success of policies on preserving the Karelian language and culture [1].

Today, the Republic of Karelia is home to three sub-groups of Karelians: *Karelians proper* populating the West of the Republic to the north of the River Suna; *Livvia Karelians* living at the eastern shore of Lake Ladoga and in the central part of the Olonets Isthmus; and *Lude Karelians* populating a narrow strip to the east from the Livvi area closer to Lake Onega. The area of Karelian settlement in the Republic of Karelia was split in two parts — the northern (home to Karelians speaking dialects close to the Finnish language) and southern (the area of the Livvi and Lude Karelian groups — a result of a merge with Vepsians). The northern part of the Republic is traditionally called White Sea Karelia, the southern one — Olonets Karelia.

The two other sub-ethnic groups of Karelians residing outside the Republic of Karelia are *Tver* or *Upper Volga Karelians* (most of them live in the Likhoslavl, Spirovo, Ramshki, and Maksatikha districts) and *Tikhvin Karelians* (concentrated in the vicinity of the village of Klimovo in the Leningrad region) [1]. Although earlier it was home to a substantial proportion of the Karelians who settled there in the course of migration to the Upper Volga and Valdai areas, the Karelians living in this area were strongly affected by assimilation. Now their number is six times as small as that of the Karelians in the Republic of Karelia (however, a century ago, their number was 1.5 times as great as that of the Karelians residing in their historical homeland).

The Vepsians, as well as the Karelians, belong to the northern group of Baltic-Finnish peoples. In 2006, the Vepsians were listed as an indigenous minority of Russia. The 2010 census recorded approximately 6,000 Vepsians [4]. A century ago, according to the 1897 census, there were 25,000 Vepsians (called at the time *Chude*). Therefore, in the 20th/early 21st century, the number of Vepsians has fallen more than fourfold. The modern Vepsians refer to themselves as *vepsä*, *bepsä*, *vepsläižed*, *bepsaažed*, and *lüdinikad* [11].

As the studies by I.I. Mullonen suggest, the historical area of the Vepsian settlement bordering on Lake Onega stretched to Vygozero in the North, Ladoga in the West, and Lakes Beloye and Lacha in the South-East (fig. 4). In the Middle Ages, the Vepsian territory was incorporated into the Novgorod Republic. Later, the southern part of the Vepsian territory diminished as the lands were populated by Russian colonists.

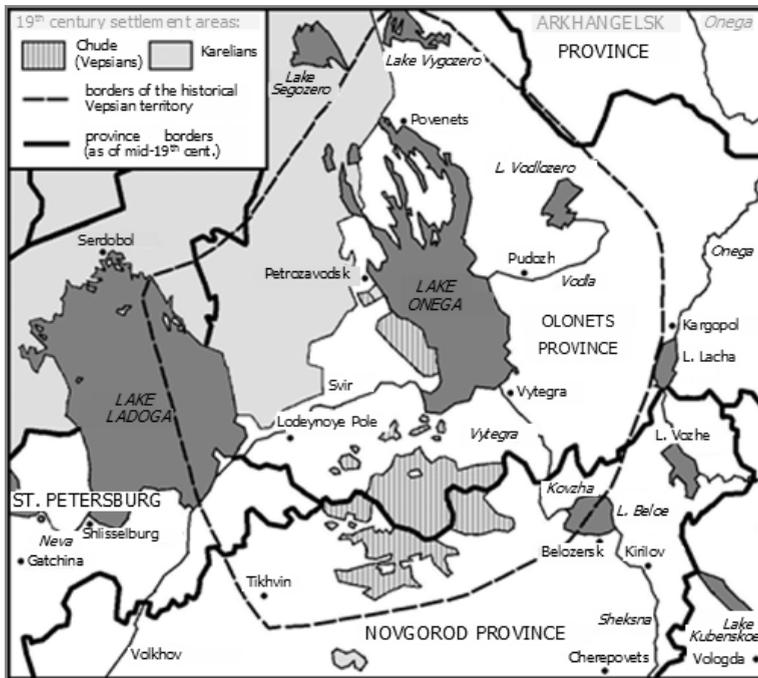


Fig. 4. The historical Vepsian territory and the areas of Vepsian settlement in the mid-10th century [10; 16]

Moving to the north, the Vepsians merged with the Karelian tribes, as a result of which two Karelian sub-ethnic groups speaking dialects close to the Vepsian language emerged — the Livvi and Lude Karelians. The Vepsians who settled on the western shore of Lake Onega created an isolated group (Onega or Northern Vepsians), which survives to this day. The northern Vepsians were separated from the Central and Southern Vepsians by Russian colonists who settled in the valley of the River Svir [10]. As a result, the Vepsians can be considered a dispersed ethnic group.

As early as the mid-10th century, the territory of Vepsian settlement (called *Chude* at the time) was divided into several areas [16]. The Vepsians

lived in the Olonets and Novgorod provinces. The province border split the Vepsian ethnic territory in two large parts — the Northern and Southern ones. Each of these parts incorporated separated areas: two significantly isolated areas in the North (the Olonets province) and three relatively isolated ones in the South (the Novgorod province). The long period of territorial and administrative dispersion affected the modern dialect differentiation of Vepsians and their division in groups.

The current territory of Vepsian settlement is a result of its gradual reduction caused by the Russification of Vepsian settlements [10]. The largest concentration of Vepsians is found in the southern part of the Republic of Karelia on the shore of Lake Onega (3.4 thousand people). The lands of Western Onega area, which are densely populated by Vepsians, were incorporated into Karelia as early as 1924 [17]. In 1994, the Vepsian national volost was established in the Onega district of Karelia, however, it was eliminated in 2006.

The second largest group of Vepsians resides in the East of the Leningrad region (approximately 1,400 people); the third largest group is preserved in the Vologda region (400 people) [4]. Technically, these groups comprise a single settlement area situated at the borders of four districts of two regions (the Podporozhye, Tikhvin, and Boksitogorsk districts of the Leningrad region, and the Babaev district of the Vologda region). However, today there are significant gaps within this area (fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Modern Vepsian settlements in the Republic of Karelia, Leningrad, and Vologda regions [15; 18]

Based on the names of former administrative districts, as well as rivers and lakes, the Vepsians are divided into six groups: *Shyoltozero Vepsians* in the Republic of Karelia, *Vinnitsa, Efimovsky, and Shugozero Vepsians* in the Leningrad region, and *Shimozero and Beloye Ozero Vepsians* in the Vologda region [11]. According to the three major dialects of the Vepsian language, *Shyoltozero Vepsians* are also called *northern Vepsians*, *Efimovsky Vepsians* *southern Vepsians*, and the other groups *Central Vepsians* [3].

The **Setos** are a small Baltic Finnish people that formed in the early 20th century on the territory of the Pskov province of the Russian Empire. In 1945, the Setos — considered at the time as an ethnographic group of Estonians — were divided by the republican border between Russia and Estonia, which turned in a state border in 1991. The Setos refer to themselves as *setoq*. The Russians used to call them *Pskov Chude, Pskov Estonians*, and *setukezy* [9; 13].

In Russia, the Setos live in the Pechory district of the Pskov region. For the first time, they were identified in the Russian census of 2002; however, they were considered as a special group of Estonian population. In 2010, the Setos were listed as an indigenous minority of Russia [7]. According to the 2010 census, 117 residents of the Pechory district referred to themselves as Setos [4], which is an underestimation, since the Setos traditionally identify themselves as Estonians. The results of the expedition organised in summer 2014 by the Department of Geography of the Pskov State University and supported by the Russian Geographical Society, the number of Setos in the Pechory district reaches 200 people, including 140 in the rural areas.

In Estonia, the Setos reside in the western margin of the Põlva and Võro counties, which — as well as the Pechory district — were part of the Pskov district until 1920. Today, these territories astride the border comprise the historical and geographical area of Setomaa ('the land of the Setos'). The total number of Setos within this historical and geographical area can be estimated at 2,000 people.

Estonian linguists consider the Seto language as one of the variants of the Võro dialect of Southern Estonian language, which is almost obsolete in Estonia. The Setos regard it as an independent language. Unlike the Estonians, who first adopted Catholicism and then Protestantism, the Setos were converted to Orthodoxy in the 15/16th century. Moreover, the Seto culture incorporates both pre-Christian traits and borrowings from the cultures of neighbouring peoples, especially, the Russians [9].

In 1920, according to the Treaty of Tartu, the Pechory district — the Setos' homeland — was incorporated into Estonia. This happened despite the fact that the Russians accounted for 65 % and the Setos for only 25 % of the local population. The Petserimaa county was established there with the capital in Pechory (Petseri in Estonian) [8].

In 1944, the recently established Pskov region regained almost 60 % of the territories incorporated into Estonia in 1920. In 1945, the Pechory district was founded on that territory [9]. Estonia gained the western margin of the Pechory district. As a result, the traditional area of Seto settlement was divided between Estonia and Russia (fig. 6).

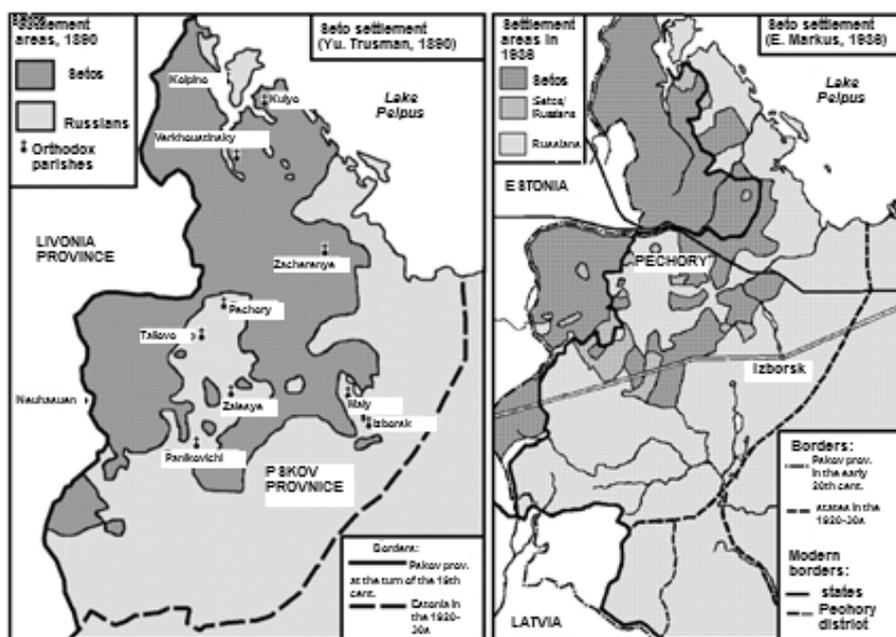


Fig. 6. The areas of Seto settlement in 1890 [20, p. 285] and 1936 [19]

A decrease in the number of Setos in the Pechory district was first observed in the mid-20th century, i.e. almost immediately after the lands had been returned to Russia. It was explained by the outflow of the Seto youth, who preferred to obtain higher and secondary education in the Estonian language at Estonian vocational schools and universities. In the second half of the 20th century, the Seto settlement area in the Pechory district was steadily shrinking. It turned into a series of isolated ‘patches’ concentrated in the centre of the district. Most Setos reside today in the Estonian part of Setomaa.

The Seto settlements at the Estonian border were initially rather stable. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of a state border with Estonia, these settlements in the vicinity of the border also started to disappear. For instance, a 1999 ethnographic study located the Setos only in 50 settlements [8]. The 2014 expedition recorded a decrease to 36 settlements (fig. 7).

On average, each settlement with the Seto presence was home to four representatives of the ethnic group. It is worth noting that, in 1945, the average population of Seto villages was 45 people. Therefore, over the last 70 years, the average population of the Seto settlements in the Pechory district has decreased tenfold. The rural settlements where the Setos were discovered by the 2014 expedition cannot be called Seto villages proper, since most of them are dominated by the Russian population. A key trend in the changes in the Seto distribution in the Pechory district, which became pronounced in the 21st century, is their concentration in relatively large rural settlements.

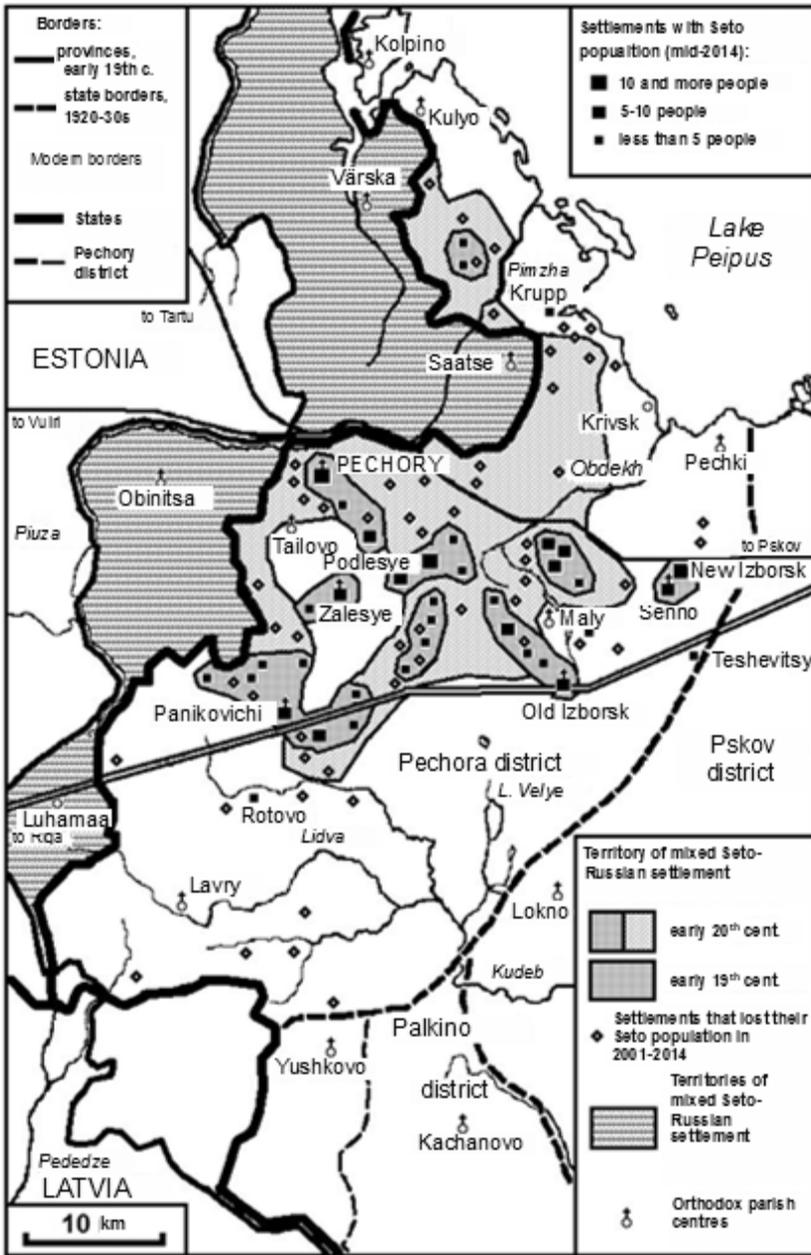


Fig. 7. Changes in the Seto settlement in the 20th/early 21st century (compiled by the authors)

A comparison of changes in the Seto population in the Russian and Estonian parts of Setomaa shows a catastrophic reduction in the number of Setos in Russia. If, in 1945 when Setomaa was divided between Russia and Estonia, the number of Setos was almost equal on either side of the border (approximately 6,000 people [8]), today, their number decreased three/fourfold in Estonia and almost thirtyfold in the Pechory district of the Pskov re-

gion. The key cause of a dramatic decrease in the number of Pechory Setos was emigration to Estonia. Mass outflows were observed both in the Soviet times (mostly in the 1950—70s), and the post-Soviet period (mostly, in 1993—2005).

Therefore, in the second half of the 20th/the beginning of the 21st century, the traditional area of Seto settlement in the Pechory district ‘dissolved’. Instead of a continuous area, there is a number of ‘islands’ around relatively large rural settlements attracting middle-aged and young Setos. Despite the fact that these settlements are dominated today by the Russian population, the Setos have an opportunity to retain their ethnic identity there (unlike the migrants who have moved to Estonia or large Russian cities). In most ‘Seto’ settlements, the number of Setos does not exceed 1—2 people, mostly, retirees. Therefore, one can expect a further reduction in the number of Seto settlements in the Pechory district.

Conclusion. One of the avenues of research on indigenous minorities of Russia can be a comparison of their spatial development and demographic changes. In particular, the most critical demographic situation is faced by the ethnic groups, whose geographical dispersion resulted in the formation of sub-ethnic groups that were relatively isolated from the major ethnic concentrations. As the cases of the Karelians, the Vepsians and the Setos show, the cause of ethnic dispersion can be both mass resettlement and state or the administrative borders dividing technically integrated ethnic concentrations.

To prevent the disappearance of small peoples, there is a need to take measures aimed to preserve their languages and cultures. Moreover, these efforts should be concentrated in relatively large, including urban, areas of residence of younger representatives of such ethnic groups.

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