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PROSPECTS FOR RUSSIAN-ESTONIAN COOPERATION IN PRESERVING THE ETHNIC IDENTITY OF THE SETOS

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Abstract. *This article examines cross-border cooperation between Russia and Estonia in preserving the ethnic identity of the indigenous Seto people. Setu (Seto) are a small indigenous people with distinctive cultural traditions living in the Pechora region in the northeast of the Pskov Oblast of Russia and in southeastern Estonia. The reasons for the reduction and imbalance in the number of Setos in two countries at the beginning of the 21st century are analyzed. The article examines the specifics of the public organizations' activities of Seto representatives in Russia and Estonia, analyzes the effectiveness of measures already taken by the governments to preserve and draw attention to the Seto culture, to ensure cross-border communications between representatives of this people living in the two countries, and assesses the current state of interaction between Russia and Estonia for the purpose of organizing Seto cultural events. The aspects relating to the support of the functioning of museum objects dedicated to the Seto culture are considered. The current state and the number of museums and memorial sites dedicated to the Seto culture and functioning in the territory of the two countries are assessed. Problems are identified, the solution of which at the level of the governments of Russia and Estonia is*

strategically important for preserving the Seto culture and slowing down their assimilation. Attention is paid to the negative impact of bureaucratization in the execution of documents by representatives of the Setos for crossing the state border that separates the historical area of their settlement. In the conclusion, the most promising areas of interaction between the governments of the two countries are proposed to support and popularize the activity of Setos in the field of culture and tourism, as well as to improve their quality of life; at the same time, a complex interaction of the governments of both Russia and Estonia is proposed. The perspective directions of domestic and cross-border tourism associated with visiting the Seto settlement area are also considered.

Keywords: *Setu; Estonia; Cross-Border Cooperation; Ethnic Identity; International Relations; Traditional Culture*

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Russia is traditionally a multinational state, and the Finno-Ugric peoples play a significant role in the diversity of cultural traditions and the identity of the ethnic composition of the country. More than 15 Finno-Ugric peoples and sub-ethnic groups belonging to them live on the territory of the Russian Federation, their total number exceeds 2 million people [1]. Each nation has rich traditions of material and non-material culture, the features of which were studied by scientists and reflected in numerous monographs throughout the twentieth century. At the same time, the number of representatives of various Finno-Ugric peoples varies significantly. In accordance with the Unified list of indigenous small-numbered peoples of the Russian Federation, 5 Finno-Ugric peoples are classified as small: Vepsians, Vod, Izhora, Sami, Setus [2]. At the same time, the modern distribution area of Vepsians, Vods and Izhora is concentrated on the territory of Russian regions – the Leningrad Oblast (Vepsians, Izhora, Vods), as well as the Vologda Oblast and the Republic of Karelia (Vepsians). Representatives of the other two peoples, belonging to the indigenous minority in accordance with Russian law, also live in the territories of other countries – in particular, Norway, Finland and Sweden (Sami), as well as Estonia (Seto).

The administrative-territorial disunity of the ethnically uniform Finno-Ugric peoples negatively influenced the dynamics of their numbers, contributed to assimilation, and made it difficult for contacts between their representatives throughout the 20th century [3]. At the same time, it could be both internal in nature and be associated with the division of traditional areas of settlement by state borders. If in the first case the consequence was only the development and maintenance of infrastructure, often without taking into account the interests of indigenous peoples by the metropolis, in the second it

significantly hampered the possibilities of contacts in the once united ethnic environment.

The collapse of the USSR and the declaration of independence by the former Soviet republics also led to the fact that the original historical areas of settlement of indigenous peoples ended up in the territories of neighboring independent countries. In these conditions, governments had to take into account the need for communication of people belonging to the same ethnic group, but citizens of different countries. The Setos found themselves in a similar situation, the traditional territory of settlement of which after 1991 became part of both Russia and Estonia.

This article proposes to consider the already implemented, currently operating and promising measures to support and popularize the Seto culture in the framework of cross-border cooperation between Russia and Estonia, as well as to analyze the political context that predetermines the intensity and direction of such cooperation.

Setu (also Setu, Setukez, "Pskov chud", "half-believers") is a small Finno-Ugric ethnic group living in the southeastern part of Estonia (Võrumaa and Põlvamaa counties), as well as the Pechora district of the Pskov Oblast (from 1920 to 1940 – in Petseri County of the Republic of Estonia). The historical area inhabited by the Seto people is called Setumaa or Setukezia. The number of Setos in modern Russia and Estonia differs radically and amounts to no more than 200 people in Russia and more than 10,000 in Estonia. Considering that, according to the 2010 census, 214 people classified themselves as Setos, no more than 1.8% of the total population of Setos currently live in the Russian Federation. However, it should be noted that the modern realities associated with such a significant disparity in numbers were caused by the political and economic situation in the 1990s, when the migration outflow (mainly to Estonia) amounted to 4,600 people [4]. Nevertheless, the former settlement area of the Seto in the Pskov Oblast, where representatives of this people lived in the second half of the twentieth century, retains evidence associated with the Seto culture and expressed in the peculiarities of architecture, folklore, etc. In addition, the traditions of contacts between Setos living in neighboring states and participation in joint cultural events are preserved.

The administrative division of the Seto area had certain historical prerequisites. In August 1944, the Pskov Oblast was formed on the basis of the Pskov district of the Leningrad Oblast. In January 1945, by a decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR, the Pechora region entered the Pskov Oblast, organized from 8 volosts and the city of Pechora, which were

previously part of Estonia. At the same time, the northern and western parts of the Seto settlement area (Setomaa) were left within Estonia. The new border between the RSFSR and the Estonian SSR split the area of settlement of Setos, creating different conditions for cultural development for different groups of Setos. Split in two, Setomaa did not receive the cultural autonomy that existed until 1917. In the Pskov part of Setomaa (Pechora region), the number of Setos in 1945 was already less than 6 thousand and began to decline rapidly in the future, including due to the Russification of part of the Setos. At the same time, the Estonianization of the Setos continued in Estonia.

If by the beginning of the 20th century, the population of the Seto reached its maximum (21 thousand people), then later, due to a number of economic and political reasons, there was a tendency towards a decrease in the Seto population. In 1945, in the Pskov part of Setomaa (Setomaa), the number of Setos was less than 6 thousand people. The administrative border between the RSFSR and the Estonian SSR created different conditions for the cultural development of different Seto groups. The assimilation processes of the Setos on both sides accelerated under the influence of Estonian and Russian culture [5].

In the Soviet statistics, the Setos were not singled out as an independent people, referring them to the Estonians. In the mid-1960s, no more than 4 thousand Setos lived in the Pechora district of the Pskov region, and according to the 1989 census, there were only 1140 "Estonians", of which, presumably, 950 Setos. The main factor in the change in the number of Setos in the Pskov region was their migration outflow to Estonia after the declaration of the last independence and the emergence of the state border with the Pskov Oblast.

Rural settlements in the modern borderlands of Estonia and Russia are of particular interest to the researcher. The existence of the ethnic contact zone of the Finno-Ugrians and Slavs on the territory of the Pechora region determined the ethnic "diversity". The social space was organized perpendicular to the modern state border, the boundaries of ethnic groups were blurred, the population – regardless of ethnicity – used the administrative border between Estonia and Russia for their own benefit (for example, price differences, supply differences, etc.). With the transformation of the political space, the social boundaries of the rural community have changed.

The border also for the first time raised the question of belonging to the national state before the villagers. In this regard, another task for the researcher arises – to explain how the space of identities of the rural community

has changed with the emergence of the border as the embodiment of the state, how the hierarchy of identities is formed in rural areas in a new context.

The word “Setu” itself appeared in the public discourse of Estonia and Russia only in the early 1990s. Until that time, only a narrow circle of ethnographers knew about a small ethnic group living next to the Russians on the territory of the Pechora region. The “borderline” of the Seto settlement area and some of the features of their culture have caused a discussion in scientific circles about their ethnicity. In the early 1990s, due to a change in the political context, the topic of Seto also became the subject of public discussion. Unlike Lutheran Estonians, Setos profess Orthodoxy, like their Russian neighbors, but speak the southern dialect of the Estonian language, which contains a number of borrowings from Russian. Having preserved some pre-Christian customs and mores, the Setos received the nickname “half-believers” from their Russian neighbors, and they often call themselves that. A huge role in the formation of the Seto culture belongs to the Pskov-Pechora Orthodox monastery. The city of Pechora, which was a kind of capital of Setomaa before the establishment of the border, and now still has a sacred meaning for the older generation of Setos.

However, in the late 1980s, the political context changed. Setu did not remain aloof from the widespread processes of ethnic mobilization. In the general flow of national-political movements in the late 1980s and early 1990s, two public organizations emerge at once on opposite sides of the symbolic border between the two republics. Work began on the formation of an ethnic community (the revival of language and folklore, the creation of an ABC book, the popularization of national heroes, etc.), leaders, activists of the movement appeared, and its ideology took shape. The Seto movement was characterized by a certain nostalgic attitude towards the local traditional peasant culture and the idealization of the “village” past [6].

The Setos are interesting in that they have preserved the ancient layer of their culture, expressed in clothing, jewelry, folklore, folk craft and in their traditions. The peculiar culture of the Seto was appreciated by the UNESCO commission. Thus, by the decision of the UNESCO Commission dated September 30, 2009, the Seto singing was included in the World Heritage List.

It should be noted that in the last decade of the 20th century, the number of Setus (Setos) in the Pechora region has declined so much that one can speak not only about depopulation, but also about the impending disappearance of the Setus (Setos) as an ethnocultural unit.

In the Pechora district of the Pskov region today, there are two settlement areas of the Setos – the northern (border, western part of the Krupp

volost) and the main one (with scattered areas on the territory of Panikovskaya, Izborsk, Novoizborsk volosts and the urban settlement of Pechora).

In Estonia, there are from 10 to 13 thousand Setos, in Russia, according to the 2010 census, 214 people classified themselves as a Set (in 2002 – 250 people). Despite such a small number, Setos are quite active in social activities, hold events and strive to interact with the related population of Estonia.

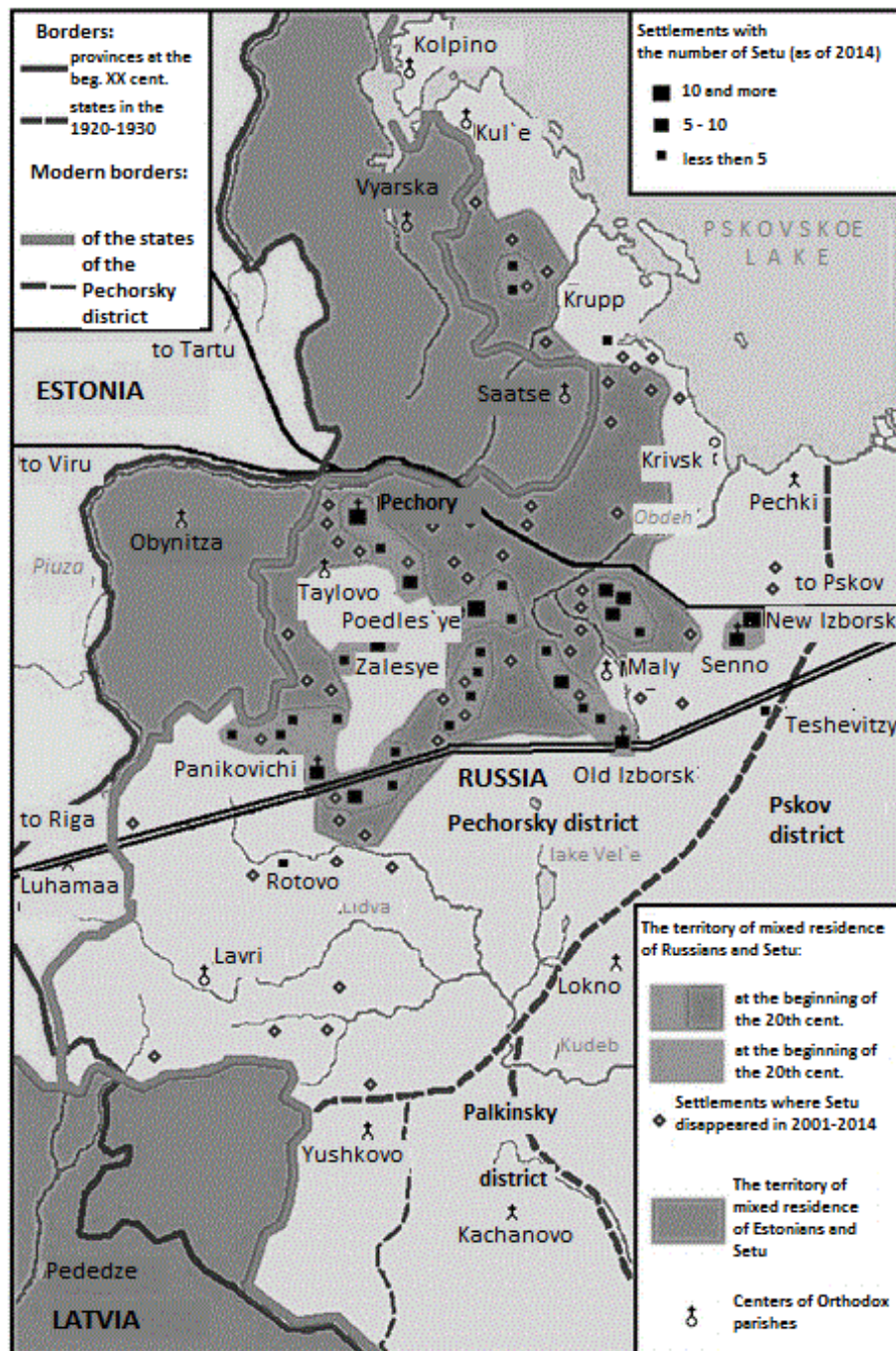


Fig. 1. Changes in the Seto settlement area from the beginning of the 20th century to 2014 [7]

However, given that a certain part of the Setos during the census declare themselves as Estonians who also originally lived in the territory of the Pechora region, their real number may slightly differ from official statistics. So, according to the Pechora regional public organization "Ethno-cultural society of the Seto people" the number of Setos in the Pechora region as of 01.06.2010 is 337 people, including: 35 people under the age of 18; from 18 to 30 years old – 22 people; from 31 to 55 years – 57 people, of which 33 are women; over 55 years old – 223 people [8].

At the end of the 1980s, against the background of democratization and publicity, interest in the original culture of indigenous peoples began to grow, the ethnic mobilization of their representatives increased, and public organizations began to form, defending interests and carrying out educational activities. In particular, in 1987 the Vepsian national holiday "The Tree of Life" is held for the first time in the Leningrad region. Holidays that are relatively identical in program, focus and theme – usually annual – are beginning to be organized by representatives of Izhora, Ingrian Finns, Karelians and other Finno-Ugric peoples. Attracting the attention of the media and local residents, such events contributed to the broadcast of culture and folklore elements, demonstrated the ethnic diversity of various regions of the multinational state. For the Setos, this practice began to be realized much later.

In 1993, the Ethno-Cultural Seto Society was created in Russia, one of the activities of which was declared humanitarian contacts with the Setos of the Vyrus district of Estonia. The Society was created as a district public organization to raise awareness of the Seto people problems and to popularize their culture. The organization was formed as a regional national-cultural association of Setos living in the Pechora district of the Pskov region. The main goals of the creation of the society were the revival of national identity and the protection of the social interests of the Seto people, the implementation of friendly coexistence with other peoples, the organization of folk Seto festivals (kirmash) on the days of Orthodox holidays with worship in the Seto language, with the participation of folk creative groups. Over the past decades, the society has been working to preserve Seto folklore, everyday traditions, traditional dress, with the active participation of the Seto Ethnic Society, together with the Izborsk Museum-Reserve, the Museum-Estate of the Seto People's Life was created. The resource potential of the museum-reserve makes it possible to create conditions for the preservation and popularization of Seto culture, traditional crafts, everyday life, holding mass ethnocultural holidays, which requires significant financial investments.

In Estonia, in the early 1990s, public organizations were also formed to rally the Setos living in the country, including those who emigrated from Russia. First of all, the Seto Congress, the Setomaa Volost Union should be mentioned. The county administrations of southeastern Estonia organize the work of a radio station in the Seto language, the publication of a newspaper and a magazine, the allocation of funds for language training in schools, support and adaptation in the new place of residence of elderly Seto representatives.

In turn, the administration of the Pskov Oblast also took a number of measures aimed at preserving the Seto culture in the Pechora region as the place of the original residence of the people. So, in 2011–2014 in the region there was a state target program "Support for the indigenous small people of the Seto, living in the Pechora region" [8]. The objectives of the program were to create conditions for the preservation and further development of the territories of traditional residence of the indigenous Seto people in the Pechora region and the preservation of unique ethnocultural traditions and rituals, the traditional way of life of the Setos. The tasks include the creation of a system for monitoring the socio-demographic situation among the Setos and the scientific study of the ethnocultural traditions of the Setos, assisting the Setos in solving socio-demographic problems, developing the local Seto community by creating conditions for activating the activities of public associations in the Pechora region.

Ultimately, the main task of the program was to draw public attention to the Seto as the bearer of the unique culture and life of one of the indigenous peoples of Russia.

The implemented program did not allow to achieve significant changes in demographic processes and did not prevent the tendency of the rapid aging of the Seto people in the Pechora region. In addition, the migration growth of the Seto population from Estonia to the Pechora region, opposite to the tendencies of the 1990s, when many Russian Setos received the second – Estonian – citizenship in a simplified procedure based on ethnicity, also failed to intensify. At the same time, certain measures that were supposed to be implemented thanks to the program "Support for the indigenous Seto people living in the Pechora region" were implemented. Thus, the level of employment of the Setos at small and medium-sized businesses and peasant farms in the Pechora region, focused on preserving the traditional way of life of the Setos, has increased. In addition, the number of comfortable facilities in places of traditional settlement of Setos in the Pechora region, including newly created

infrastructure facilities, has increased, which has led to an increase in the number of visitors to ethno-cultural centers located in the Pechora region. An important contribution to this process was made by the State Historical-Architectural and Natural-Landscape Museum-Reserve "Izborsk", in the form of a branch, which opened an exposition dedicated to the culture of the Seto. In addition, within the framework of the program, cultural and educational activities were implemented to preserve and develop the traditions of the Seto – for example, language ones (children's linguistic camp for the Seto people in 2012) [9]. The mass media of the Pskov Oblast also began to pay more attention to the activities of public activists positioning the Seto culture, which was primarily associated with the emergence of the practice of holding regular events [10]. In the same period, scientific research works on the socio-demographic situation among the Setos and the study of the ethnocultural traditions of the people began to appear [4].

Thus, at the present time in Russia there is a state museum in the village Sigovo, Pechora region – "Museum-estate of the Seto people", a branch of the State Historical-Architectural and Natural-Landscape Museum-Reserve "Izborsk", opened in 2001. In addition, in the same place there is a private museum "In memory of the Seto people", founded by T. N. Ogareva in 1996. It is important to note that the items that formed the expositions of museums have been collected since the early 1990s among local residents, including those who left the Pskov region and went to permanent residence in the Republic of Estonia.

Since 2008, the Museum-Estate of the Seto people has been holding the annual Setumaa Festival – Family Reunions on 28 August, which in recent years has gathered from 800 to 1000 representatives of the Seto people, most of whom are citizens and residents of Estonia [11].

The COVID-19 pandemic has made its own adjustments to the festival. In the absence of an opportunity to organize an event in person, in 2020 and 2021 the festival was held in an online format with the participation of two platforms in parallel – in Russia and in Estonia, which became an example of consolidating the efforts of Seto public organizations in two countries using modern technologies and provided access to an unlimited number of Internet users to a virtual visit of the event.

There are also museums dedicated to the Seto culture in Estonia, and the practice of creating such museums in the country is older. Thus, in 1974 in Saatse the first museum was created by the director of the local school, social activist Viktor Weeber. Later, in the 1990s, two more Seto museums were

opened – in Värskä and Obinitsa. At the moment, there is a portal that unites the Internet resources of all Estonian cultural organizations and museums dedicated to the Setos; they are also featured on social media. These institutions, in accordance with their working hours, provide regular access to the exhibitions for tourist groups. In 2015, the village of Obinitsa in Setooma was selected by an international jury as the cultural capital of the Finno-Ugric world, in the context of which a number of events that were held in the region attracted many tourists.

The mission of the Seto Institute Foundation (SA Seto Instituut) is the coordination and development of Setomaa, scientific work in the field of Seto culture, as well as acquainting the general public with the results of this scientific work. The Seto Institute, in cooperation with other organizations in Setomaa, is involved in publishing, organizing events and training in the field of Seto culture [12].

Cross-border cooperation program "Russia – Estonia" 2014–2020 objectively included certain provisions related to the residence of the Seto people in the border territories of both countries. It notes the importance of the joint development of tourist routes in the border areas [13].

Despite the existing potential of cross-border partnership between Russia and Estonia, which is simultaneously aimed at developing the tourism potential of the territories and preserving the Seto culture, there are a number of objective difficulties that should be overcome as the COVID-19 pandemic ends and full-fledged cross-border mobility returns.

One of the main problems of contacts between Setos living in Russia and Estonia is the difficult access to Russia of representatives of this people, who are Estonian citizens, but do not have Russian passports. At the same time, given the campaign implemented by Estonia to simplify the issuance of passports to Russian Setos in 1995s-2000s, the overwhelming majority of them can freely visit Estonia, being its citizens [14, 15]. An exception was made by the Russian side only for residents of Võru and Pylvin counties, while other Setos – Estonian citizens – face significant bureaucratic difficulties when preparing documents to enter Russia, says Heli Mayak, chairman of the Seto Ethno-Cultural Society [16]. This situation is developing against the background of unresolved disputes related to the territorial claims of Estonia to the part of the territory of the Pechora region where Setos live, which are resolutely rejected by the Russian side. Nevertheless, focusing on the legal framework of 1920 (the Tartu Peace Treaty), some of the Estonian politicians in the 1990s-2000s noted that the signing of the Russian version of the border

treaty would finally split the Seto area of residence [17]. In turn, Barbie Pilvre, a member of the Estonian parliamentary commission for foreign affairs, said that “the activity of the Setos in their historical territories, located on the other side of the border in Pechory, is worth noting. Despite the poor communication at the political level, through cultural exchange, Setos develop relations between Estonian and Russian citizens. Such cultural and public diplomacy is worthy of recognition. This is a contribution to Estonian security” [18]. In addition to the obvious need for a final settlement of territorial aspects, it is important to find compromises between the Estonian and Russian sides, taking into account the ethnic specifics of the border territories, namely, the residence of the Setos there.

Comparing the measures taken by the Estonian and Russian authorities in the border areas aimed at preserving the Seto culture and improving the socio-economic situation of this community, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- the procedure for obtaining entry visas for Setos, who are currently Estonian citizens, to visit places of their original residence located in the Pechora district of the Pskov Oblast, is still complicated;
- in Estonia, Internet technologies (websites, social networks) are used to a much greater extent to inform tourists about the activities of cultural objects (museums, memorial complexes) related to the Seto culture;
- it is necessary to continue the support program for the Setos in the Pskov Oblast, which was implemented in 2011-2014;
- in both states, it is important to support private initiatives of the Seto representatives and activists to create tourist infrastructure and popularize the Seto culture.

Based on the foregoing, the following measures seem promising:

- creation of a joint coordinating council with the participation of Setos representatives from Russia and Estonia, as well as administrations of the Estonian territories of Seto residence and the Pechora district of the Pskov Oblast, consolidation of joint efforts of Seto public organizations from the both countries;
- inclusion of certain provisions related to the support of the Setos in future programs of Russian-Estonian cooperation;
- resumption of programs of material and informational support for Setos living in the Pechora region;
- provision of a simplified procedure for obtaining Russian entry visas for all Setos residing in Estonia;

- development of the activities of the State Historical-Architectural and Natural-Landscape Museum-Reserve "Izborsk" in the preservation and popularization of the Seto culture;

- implementation of grant support by the Estonian government and the administration of the Pskov Oblast of Russia to the Seto representatives, regardless of their citizenship and place of residence (in the spheres of farming development, the implementation of cultural programs, historical research, online projects);

- launch of an online tourist information resource about the Seto culture and events (festivals) held in the context of its popularization, support of communities in social networks;

- creation of an integrated cross-border tourist route connecting objects related to the Seto culture in Russia and Estonia, as well as information support for the functioning of this route;

- an increase in the number of tourist attractions related to the Seto culture and the history of the Pechora region as a whole on the territory of Russia, with their inclusion in the transboundary tourist route.

Thus, today for the administration of the Pskov Oblast, it should be relevant to support the trends opposite to the migration outflow of the late 1990s, to update the programs to support the Setos who express a desire to move to Russia from Estonia or regularly visit the Pechora region. In the future, this may make it possible to reduce the disproportion in the number of people on the territory of neighboring states. These programs can be presented in the form of grant projects, support for cultural initiatives, and development of farms.

The modern localization of Seto residence makes it possible to talk about the need to develop two or three ethnocultural Seto (Setu) centers in the Pechora region. The development of these areas is impossible without the purposeful participation of both the state authorities of the region and the local authorities of the Pechora region. At the same time, the Strategy for the socio-economic development of the Pskov Oblast until 2020 provided for a partially implemented set of measures aimed at overcoming negative factors that cause the region to lag behind in terms of economic development, including a low level of use of the objective region advantages, including its tourism potential.

One of the most important zones for the development of tourism in the Pskov Oblast includes the territory of the Pechora region with a historically established habitat of Setos. To date, certain socio-economic conditions have

developed in the Pskov Oblast, which make it possible to start implementing a program aimed at creating conditions for supporting the Seto, preserving its ethnic and cultural identity.

The implementation of the program will provide a comprehensive solution to the problems of preserving the unique Seto culture, folk crafts, traditions, language, attracting public attention to the Seto living in the Pechora region. The development of the program corresponds to the goals and objectives of the socio-economic development of the region for the long term and allows to comprehensively solve the problems of increasing the level and quality of life of the population, improving the demographic situation, developing the culture of the region and the tourist complex [8]. However, in addition to such internal programs, information, cultural and political partnership between the border territories of Russia and Estonia is strategically important, which is impossible without the support by the both governments.

The tendency for the development of domestic tourism in Russia objectively entails the expansion of infrastructure, the emergence of new objects of hotel service, the opening of new private and state museum spaces. This allows providing employment for the population, including representatives of indigenous peoples, creating new jobs, reducing labor migration, often associated with assimilation in large cities. As the COVID-19 pandemic ends, this infrastructure will remain in demand, and in border areas it may become part of a corridor for renewed outbound tourism routes. In this context, the potential of the Pechora region and the adjacent territories of Estonia as habitats for Setos is obvious. Objects related to the Seto culture and having a tourist attraction can be included in a single route linking Pskov, Izborsk and Pechory with the museum objects of the Võru and Pylvinsky districts of Estonia.

The popularization of the Seto culture in the context of the future intensification of tourist flows between Russia and Estonia, along with the socio-economic support of the Seto representatives and the provision of the most simplified movement across the border in the area of their original residence, are the main and necessary directions for the future government activities of the two countries. Such measures will allow to attract public attention and investor resources, as well as slow down the assimilation of the Setos and the decline in the number of this ethnic minority.

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