



UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
Narva College

„Exploring Language Diversity and Variation“/ ERÜ Conference 2024

“About the Multilingualism of Smaller Estonian Ethnic Minorities“

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Purpose

With the presentation, I will give a brief overview of the language and culture of the Estonian Roma.

I use the terms *Gypsies* and *Roma* interchangeably to denote this ethnic group as in Estonian, these terms are used as a parallel name (Institute of the Estonian Language 2023).

The previous name *romi* (*ibid.*) is out of use.

This is an overview study.

Roma have been relatively little studied in Estonia.

Number of Roma in Estonia

According to censuses, there have always been fewer than 1,000 Roma in Estonia since 1897 (until 2021) (see also Lutt et al. 1999: 336).

According to the population register as at 1 January 2021, there were 665 Roma living in Estonia (0.05% of the Estonian population). According to the same census, 678 (approx. 70%) Roma living in Estonia speak Romani.

The largest Roma communities are in Estonia in Harju and Pärnu counties, Tartu and Valga counties, and Ida-Viru County.

(Statistics Estonia 2021)

Estonian Roma

Gypsies living in Estonia are divided into three groups: Estonian Gypsies, Latvian Gypsies, and Russian Gypsies (Arak et al. 2013).

Estonian Roma are associated with Laiuse Roma because they have historically lived in Laiuse rural municipality (Ross, Roht-Yilmaz 2019).

Russian Roma are linked to Narva and the surrounding area, but in general, Latvian and Russian Roma that have lived in Estonia have, in these days, started to define themselves as Estonian Roma (Ross, Roht-Yilmaz 2019).

Gypsy or Roma?

Although, in general, Estonian Roma are used to being called *Gypsies* (Tali et al. 2007), the European Council recommends using the term *Roma* in international communication (Arak et al. 2013).

At the same time, since the names *Gypsy* and *Roma* have also been used in parallel in the names of cultural associations of the Gypsy community operating in Estonia, it can be assumed that the local Roma are not bothered by the use of the term *Gypsies*.

The Institute of the Estonian Language also does not condemn the use of the name “Gypsies” (Institute of the Estonian Language 2023).

Good to know: Romani, or the language of the Roma, is one of the largest minority languages in Europe. It is spoken by some 3–4.6 million Roma. The people and language are named after the Romani word *roma* (“people”). (Lutt et al. 1999)

Picture on the left: Gypsy camp 1919 (Kose Parish Museum photo)
Photo on the right: <https://folkar.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/romi-legende.jpg>

Although the Roma are known as a group of people with a nomadic lifestyle, the Roma still live mostly locally (Lutt et al. 1999: 337).



Mother tongues and multilingualism of the Gypsies

According to the 2021 census, the mother tongue of the majority of Gypsies is Romani. There are almost equally as many of those who consider Russian or Estonian as their mother tongue (a small number of the total). Only 12 people considered Latvian their mother tongue. (Statistics Estonia 2021)

In addition, Roma are generally multilingual: they are fluent in their mother tongue, Russian and Estonian, and often in some other language (often Latvian, English and Finnish). Only a very small number of Roma living in Estonia do not speak foreign languages. Proficiency in Latvian is quite common among our Roma. (Statistics Estonia 2021)

Language proficiency of Roma children

Based on his research, Roman Lutt has provided data according to which Roma parents only take their children's oral language level into account when assessing their children's language proficiency, as most of the time they write only in the so-called school language (Russian or Estonian).

It was shown that children with Roma roots who participated in the same study speak Romani, and a smaller number are fluent in Romani, Russian and Estonian simultaneously, according to the parents studied.

(Pacifier 2009)

The study of Romani languages in Estonia

Romani languages have been studied mainly by Paul Ariste in the past, although Otto Wilhelm Masing and Carl Schultz before him also collected material on the Romani language (Ross 2013).

Ariste collected language examples of the Latvian and Laiuse Gypsy dialects, and he published the results of his research in articles both in Estonia and abroad. In addition, those interested can also peruse his work in the folklore collection of the Estonian Folklore Archives. (ibid.)

Unfortunately, Ariste's work was partially destroyed during World War II (Kukk 1983).

Otto Wilhelm Masing and Carl Schultz as collectors of Romani language material

Material on the Romani language collected by O. W. Masing and C. Schultz was also used by other researchers. For example, Masing's and Schultz's records and language examples come from Laiuse Roma, which have also been used by August Friedrich Pott in his research on the same subject.

In addition, in his studies, F. Miklosich likened the language material to the material of the Finnish Gypsy dialect.

(Ross 2013)

Otto Wilhelm Masing and Carl Schultz as collectors of Romani language material

Thesleff compiled a Finnish Gypsy dictionary, which also contains notes on the vocabulary of Livonian Gypsies.

The records of Masing and Schultz were further used by A. S. Wolf for his “Liivimaa mustlaste sõnastik” (*Livonian Gypsy Dictionary*).

(Ross 2013)

Language changes in the Romani language

Paul Ariste has written, based on the language material collected by Masing, that the Laiuse dialect of the Romani language was influenced by Estonian grammar and lexicon already centuries ago.

For example, the plural identifier *-d* and loanwords, e.g. the words *seize*, *kahisa* (“seven”, “eight”), were introduced into the language.

(Ross 2013)

Paul Ariste (1905–1990)

(photo: Internet)



Paul Ariste as a researcher of the Romani language

From 1933, Ariste began to write down stories passed down by local Latvian Roma, until he became acquainted with Laiuse Gypsies, collecting language material (including folklore) from them.

(Bakker 2005)

Paul Ariste as a researcher of the Romani language

Very soon, P. Ariste published an article on Romani words (e.g. *manguma*, in the original spelling *mangáv*, “to beg”, “to ask”), which is a loanword for Romani languages in Estonian. In fact, the word is known in many other European languages besides Estonian and Latvian. (Vaba 2014)

In 1940, Ariste published a monograph on Laiuse Gypsies.

Even a few decades later, he studied the Romani language (more precisely, the words that were brought over to Latvian).

(Bakker 2005)

Paul Ariste as a researcher of the Romani language

In 1971, Ariste published proverbs collected from Gypsies in his work “Proverbium”, and in 1973 Gypsy fairy tales, and he was also instrumental in the publication of the collection “Romenge paramiši” (in the Latvian Gypsy dialect).

An example of a Gypsy proverb: „Ajsi bori lachi: xal bilondo, phenel londo“ (“Such a daughter-in-law is good who eats unsalted food and says it is salted”). (See also Mustlaskeel 2023)

Paul Ariste as a researcher of the Romani language

Later on, Ariste studied the prosody techniques (emphasis etc.) of the Romani language, in which he described, for example, how the long vowels that were generally characteristic of the Romani language have, in fact, survived only in dialects.

In 1981, P. Ariste published an article in German titled “Die Darstellungsweise einiger Zigeunerlieder” (*The manner of performing some Gypsy songs*). An interesting fact emerged from the article – a Gypsy song can be performed in two ways, i.e. depending on the gender of the singer. (Bakker 2005)

Paul Ariste as a researcher of the Romani language

Those interested can find both his articles as well as the book “Romenge paramiši. Mustlaste muinasjutte” (*Romenge paramiši. Gypsy Fairytales*) published in 1938 in Paul Ariste’s book “Mustlaste raamat” (*The Book of Gypsies*, 2012) (fairytales in Romani collected by Ariste and their translations into Estonian, ed. Urmas Sutrop).

Paul Ariste's contribution to the study of the Romani language and dialects

All in all, Paul Ariste's contribution to the study of both Latvian and Laiuse Romani dialects is invaluable. For example, no one else has studied the Laiuse Romani dialect as profoundly as Ariste did.

Paul Ariste's research in the field of the Romani language and dialects has also been recognised by the critics of his works.

(Bakker 2005)

Later study of the Romani language and culture

The study “Naisted Eesti mustlaskogukondades” (*Women in Estonian Roma communities*) (Tali et al. 2007) has looked at the position of Roma women in the family and community and in Estonia in general. An important problem pointed out by researchers is the perception of discrimination in society at times, although individuals belonging to the Roma community have fairly differing experiences in this area (ibid.).

Roma culture has been studied in Estonia by Eva-Liisa Roht, who defended her Master’s thesis on self-definition and self-presentation of Estonian Roma at the University of Tartu in 2011. In her research, she also addressed the topic of minority rights (and, more broadly, human rights), among others. (Roht 2011)

Later study of the Romani language and culture

Anette Ross has defended her Bachelor's thesis at the University of Tartu in 2013 on the topic “Eesti romade mitmekeelsus: keeleoskus, keelekasutus ja keelekasutuse mõjutajad” (*Multilingualism of Estonian Roma: language skills, language use and influencers of language use*).

She asked Roma living in Tallinn and Valga about their language choices in different areas (e.g. at home, at work, with friends, and their preference for the language of consuming media).

(Ross 2013)

Later study of the Romani language and culture

For the six informants studied by A. Ross, the preferred language at home between children and parents and grandparents was Romani.

Although children in school-age families often switch over to either Estonian or Russian when communicating with each other (the influence of the language of instruction at school), Roma family members value the Romani language and try to actively use it so that language proficiency is not forgotten. The maintaining of their own culture was also considered important.

At the same time, informants who participated in the survey said that for some Gypsy families living in their circle of acquaintances, either Russian or Estonian is used with family members. (Ross 2013)

Later study of the Romani language and culture

Roma children often use two or even three languages simultaneously as their home language. As non-Roma guests are generally not proficient in the Romani language, Romani is sometimes used as a secret language in the presence of a non-Roma guest. Outside the home, multilingualism generally continues to be commonplace. (Ross 2013)

Roma also use their language in writing, e.g. when communicating online (Eesti romad 2023/Estonian Romas 2023).

Variability of the Romani language

In general, there is a lot of variability to Romani even within a single dialect, for example older words and newer loanwords with the same meaning are used in parallel.

Example: “wolf“ may be denoted by the old Indo-Aryan word *ruv*, the Latvian loanword *vilkos*, the Russian loanword *volkos*, or the Estonian loanword *un'tis*. Pronunciation may also vary.

(Eesti romad 2023/Estonian Romas 2023)

Teaching Romani at school

In some countries, Romani is taught as a minority language at school or Roma are taught in their mother tongue. For example, in Finland and Sweden, Roma children can learn Romani at school in their native language classes.

In addition to native language classes, Sweden also offers the opportunity to study at a Romani-Swedish bilingual school, where half of the teaching is in Romani. In this case, the written language is developed, a common vocabulary and grammar has been agreed upon.

(Eesti romad 2023)

Lotfitka dialect of Romani

Anette Ross has also defended her Master's thesis on Romani languages at Tallinn University, and she has studied the Lotfitka dialect of Romani spoken in Estonia and its formation in the contact situation of languages (Ross 2017).

“The Lotfitka dialect is a dialect of the Romani language spoken in Latvia, whose speakers have settled permanently in Estonia and call themselves Latvian (Lotfitka) or Estonian (Laloritka) Roma” (Ross 2017: 5).

Applied research on Roma in Estonia

Sociological study “Eesti romade kuuluvustunne ja osalemine ühiskonnaelus” (*Sense of belonging and participation in social life of Estonian Roma*) (Karabeškin, Derman 2018)

Study on young Roman (with the main focus on education and labour market opportunities): “Roma rahvusest noorte olukord Eesti Vabariigis: haridus ja töökeskkond” (*Situation of Roma youth in the Republic of Estonia: education and working environment*) (Civitta Eesti AS 2014, study commissioned by: Tallinn University of Technology)

A short study of the Institute of Baltic Studies “Taustainfo: ülevaade romade olukorrast Eestis” (*Background information: overview of the situation of Roma in Estonia*, 2013), which briefly covers the size and geographical location of the Roma population group living in Estonia (the largest number of Roma live in Valga, Tallinn, Narva, Tartu and Pärnu).

In addition, the latter also provides information on the employment and education of Roma and the Roma civil society.

On Roma organisations in Estonia

Although several Roma organisations were registered in the early 2000s, a large number of them have now ceased their activities. For example, the North Estonian Association of Roma operated in Estonia from 2000 to 2017 (Teatmik 2023).

Since 2012, the European Roma Forum in Estonia has been actively working (Teatmik 2023), with the aim of actively involving Roma in Estonian society (Ülevaade romade olukorrast Eestis 2013).

A large-scale study report “Eesti roma (mustlaste) elanikkonna olukord ja lõimumise vajadus” (*Situation of the Estonian Roma (Gypsy) population and the need for integration*) was published in 2013, shedding light on various aspects of the Roma culture and their everyday life based on group interviews (Arak et al. 2013).

Gypsy dance and song ensemble Maljarka

There is another Gypsy dance ensemble operating in Estonia – Maljarka was founded in 2006.

The ensemble consists of about 30 dancers and four singers.

They perform Russian Gypsy dances, and their repertoire includes Gypsy songs in the Romani language.

(Eesti romad 2023/Estonian Roma 2023)

The importance of family

However, no organisation is comparable in importance to family to Roma.

Family is one of the most important institutions for Gypsies, being synonymous with both stability, unity and social organisation (Roht 2011; *Tali* et al. 2007).

The importance of family is extreme, it is a permanent feature in a changing world, in unpredictable situations, and at the same time, this social solidarity also provides social and psychological security (Arak et al. 2013).

In conclusion

In conclusion, it could be argued that the Romani language and culture have in recent times been studied relatively little in the Estonian context, although they have historically been one of the national minorities in Estonia.

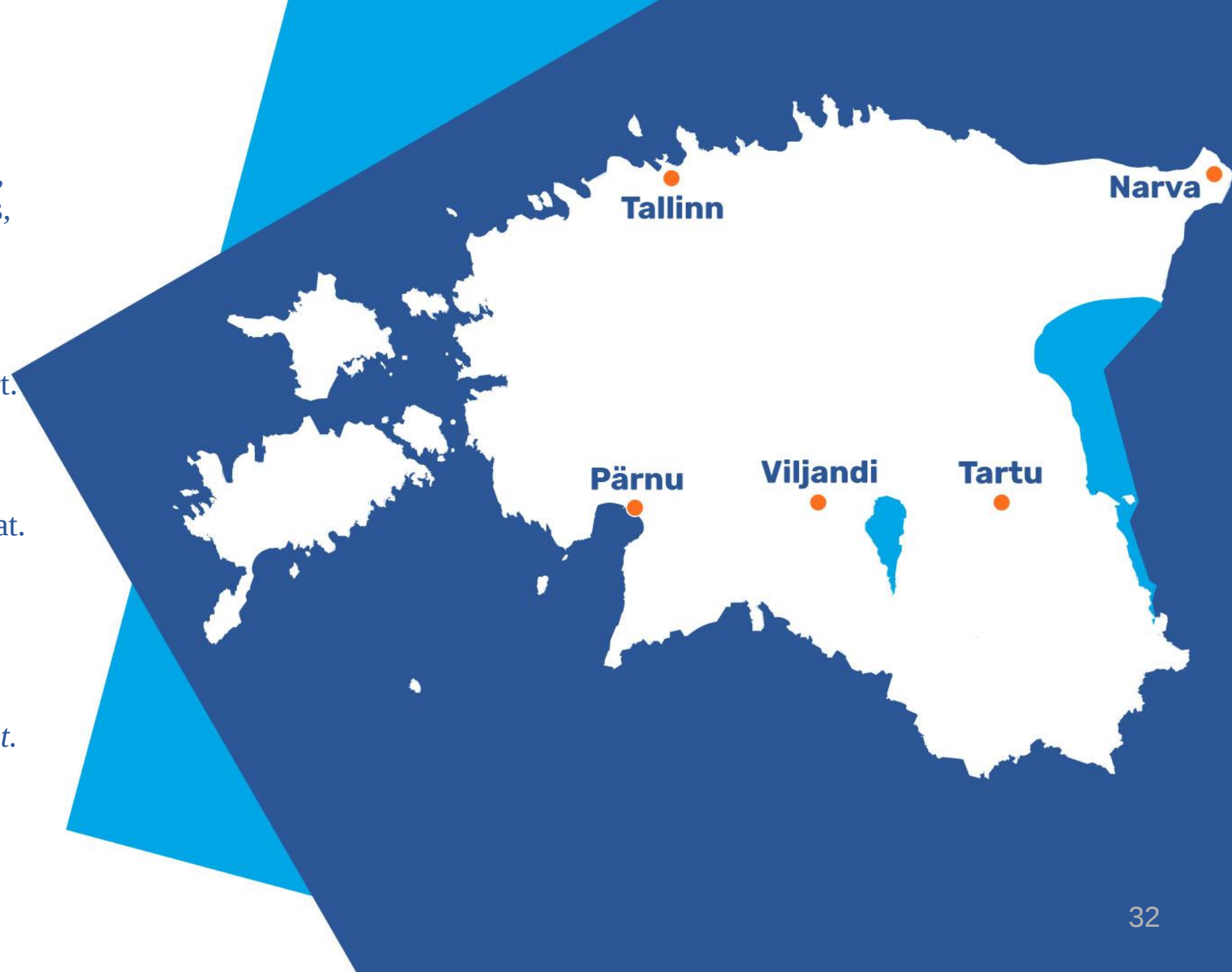
As there is still plenty of room in the research field for this niche to be filled, there will hopefully be researchers to continue the research of Paul Ariste and others on the language and culture of the Roma.

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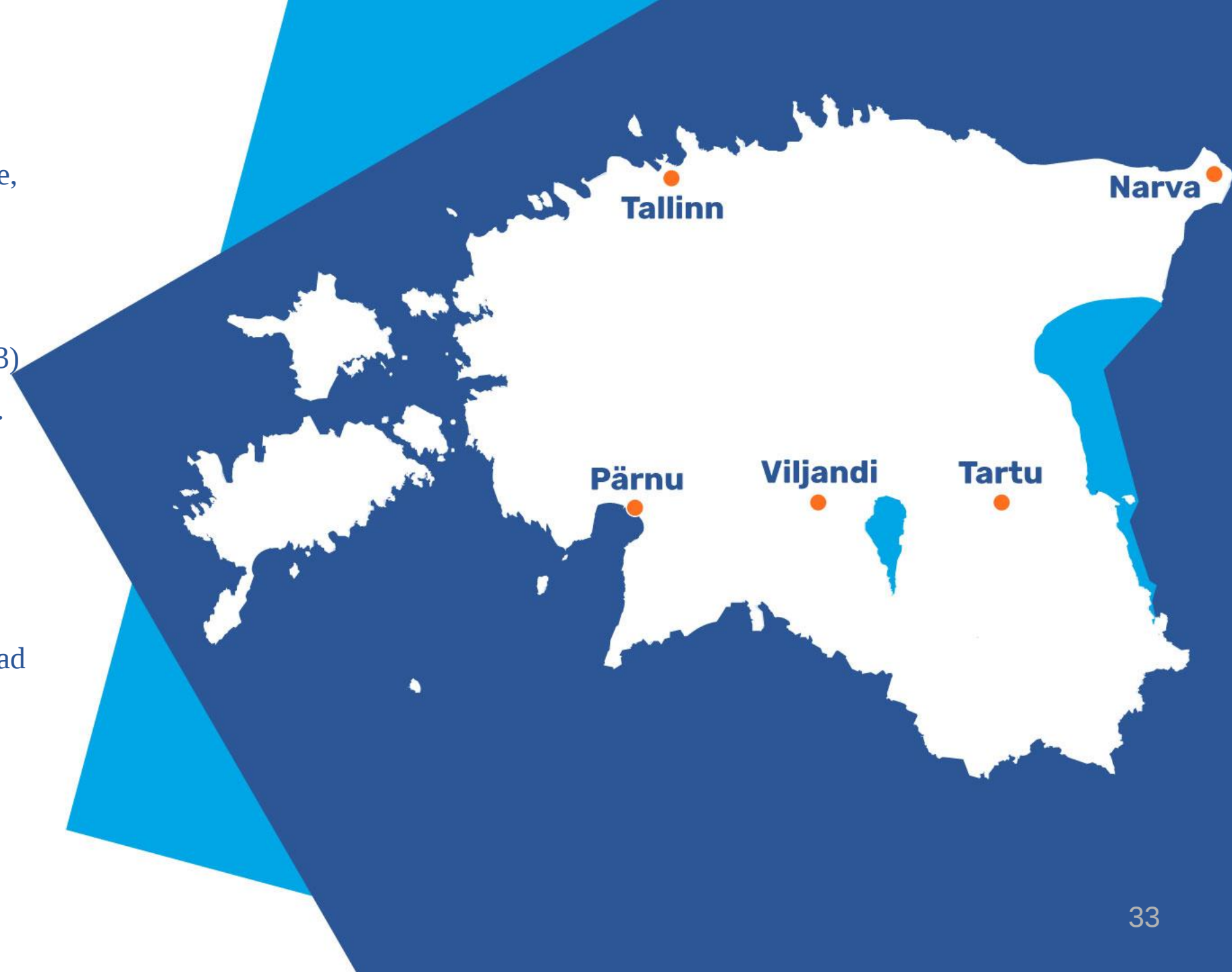
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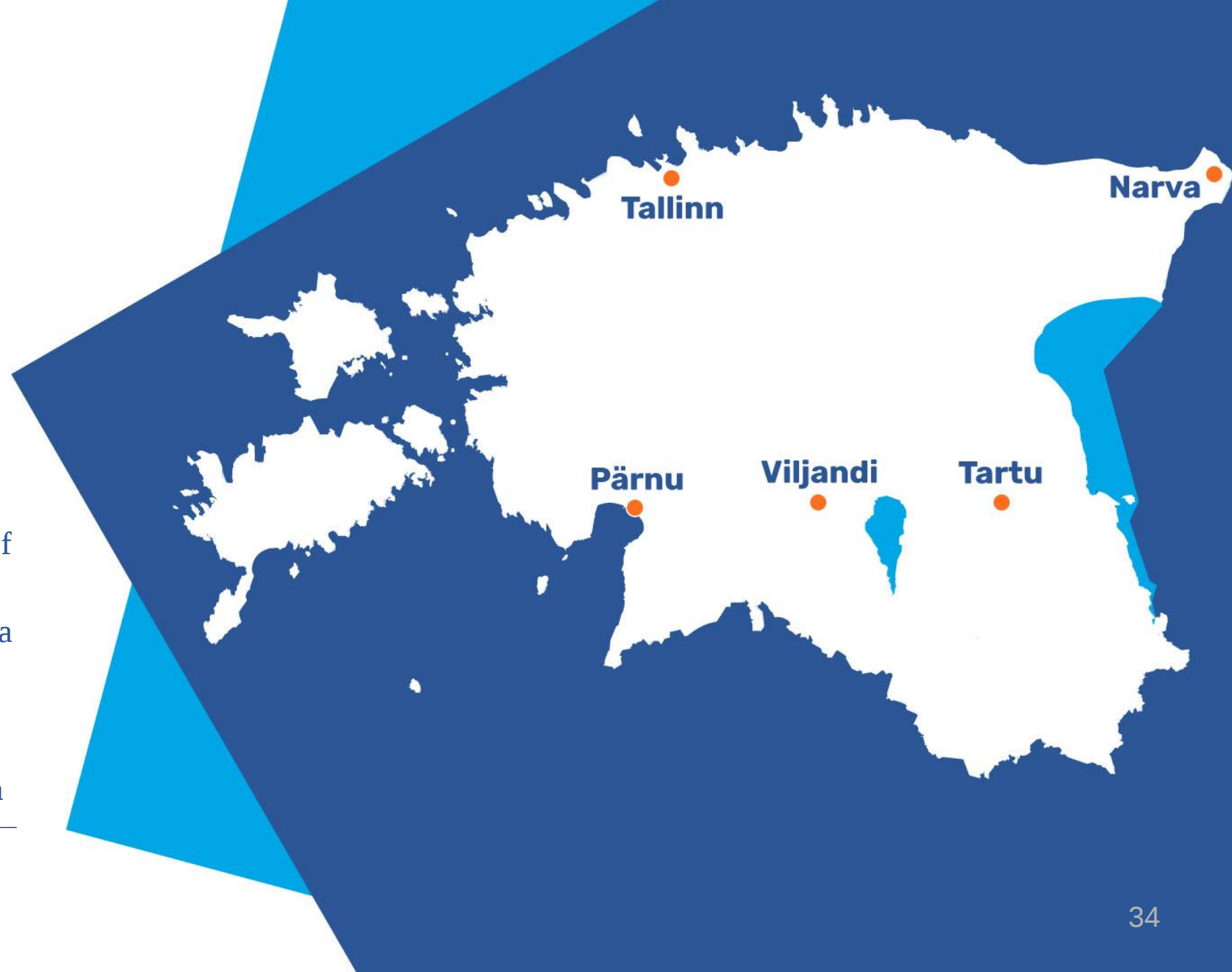
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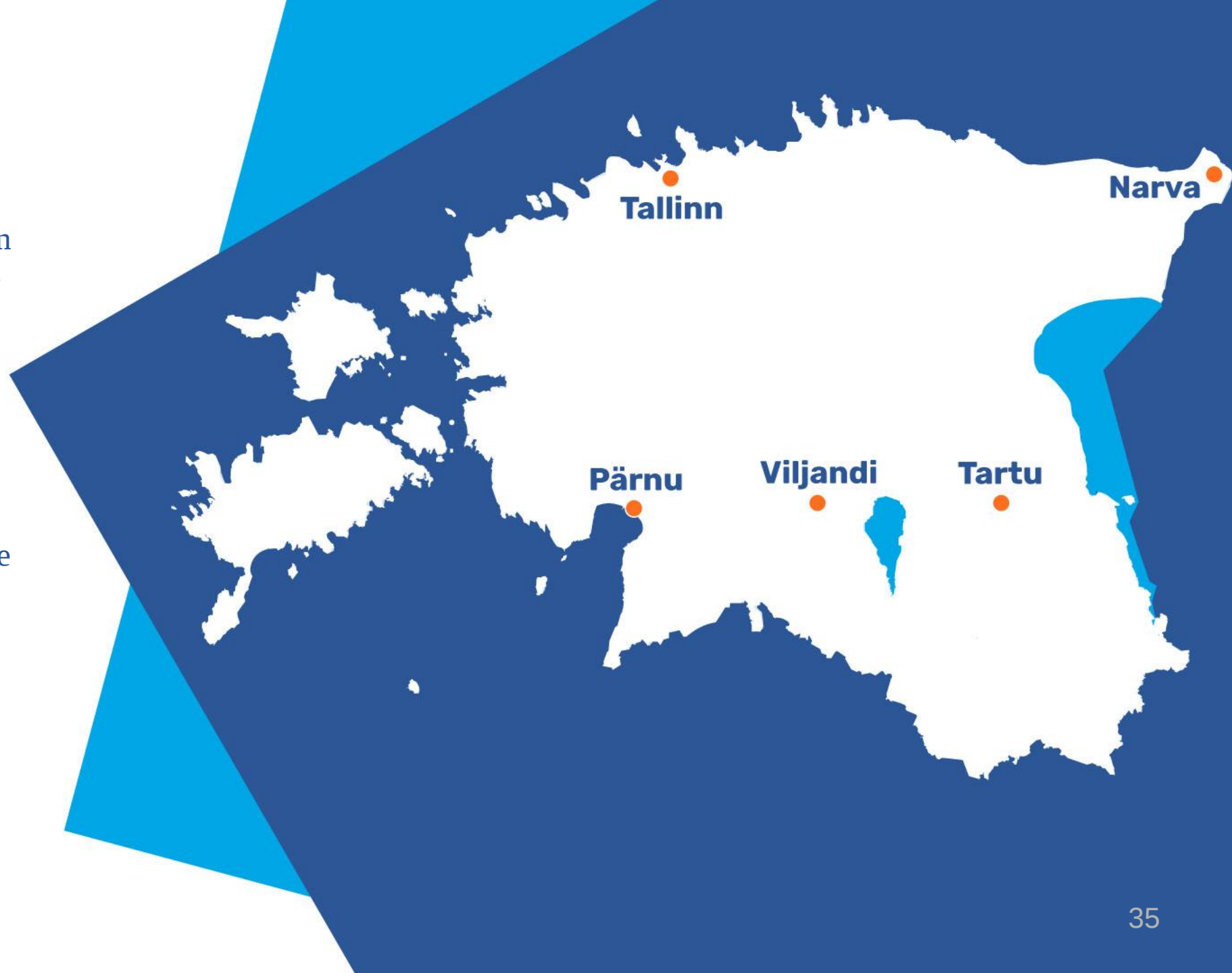


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**Thank you for
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