

SEVEN YEARS OF THE CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE IN ESTONIAN STUDIES: DIALOGUES WITH ESTONIA

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The current issue of the journal *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* bears witness to seven years of fruitful cooperation between the members of the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies (CEES). The CEES (supported by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund) is a project brought together in 2015 by a group of renowned scholars of Estonian humanities research, led by Mare Kõiva at the Estonian Literary Museum. They aimed to achieve an interdisciplinary and transnational perspective, mapping and modelling Estonian linguistic and cultural patterns created by the local communities and their historical and modern trajectories of cultural diversity. During the seven years, the CEES research has been related to the five focal areas of study expressed in a wide temporal-geographical context: (1) the Estonian culture, (2) its diasporas and related ethnic groups, (3) local adaptations of global cultural trends, (4) expressions of contemporary culture, including

transmedia texts, and (5) integration of IT and digital humanities to develop novel methodological solutions for researching the humanities. The CEES as an umbrella organisation brings together many interdisciplinary fields. The research is based on huge corpora of language and cultural phenomena compiled, archived, and made available by the CEES participant institutions and their partners.

Today, the CEES assembles more than 60 internationally recognised researchers and more than 50 post-graduate students from six institutions: the Estonian Literary Museum (initiator and holder of the project), the University of Tartu, the Institute of the Estonian Language, Tallinn University, the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, and the Tallinn University of Technology. All institutions involved in the CEES have a common goal of advancing Estonian studies. Head of the CEES consortium is Mare Kõiva, Executive Manager Piret Voolaid (2016–2022; since 2023 Liisi Laineste), project managers Meelis Roll and Anne Ostrak.

Twelve interdisciplinary research groups were established at the very start of the CEES project: corpus-based linguistic, literary, and folklore studies (led by Helle Metslang, Heiki-Jaan Kaalep); digital humanities and linguistic technologies (led by Liina Lindström, Einar Meister, Mari Sarv); historical expression and cultural practices (led by Epp Annus, Kristiina Ross, Mari Sarv); life writing studies (led by Irina Belobrovtsseva, Maarja Hollo); literary studies and textual culture (led by Liina Lukas, Arne Merilai); migration and diaspora studies (led by Leena Kurvet-Käosaar, Triinu Ojamaa); narrative studies (led by Marina Grišakova, Eda Kalmre); religiosity and myth studies (led by Tõnno Jonuks, Mare Kõiva); speech and music studies (led by Jaan Ross and Marju Raju); studies of contemporary culture (incl. the media) (led by Liisi Laineste, Saša Babič, Piret Voolaid); gender studies (led by Eve Annuk); and last but not least, ethics and philosophy of mind and language (led by Margit Sutrop). The researchers have successfully worked together to analyse data, organise seminars and workshops, publish special issues and collected volumes, and popularise their joint research results of their explorations of the Estonian culture in a globalising context.

Thanks to the CEES, the compilation and editing of monographs and thematic collections by recognised scholarly publishers in the field of Estonian humanities research has grown exponentially. Research results that have been published in monographs, collections of articles, and special issues of journals, are numerous and the numbers speak for themselves: more than 700 publications indexed in Clarivate Web of Science (WoS) and ERIH PLUS, and equally many articles in publications published by other recognised international publishers. More than 110 issues of peer-reviewed journals and 140 volumes of articles

and monographs have been published, and the CEES researchers are editors and contributors to most of Estonian humanities journals and scholarly series.

A great part of Estonian language and culture -related text corpora and databases are based on the work of the scholars of the CEES. Comparative fieldwork and extensive experimental studies have been conducted in Estonia and beyond.

Popularisation of results has taken place on all social levels and has reached various audiences, including academic research networks, cooperation partners, and professional organisations. The research teams vigorously participate in scientific international and interdisciplinary communication, using various channels for disseminating research results. This targets various age and interest groups including educational and cultural institutions, professional organisations (e.g. Academic Folklore Society, Estonian Association for Applied Linguistics, Estonian Society for Digital Humanities, Estonian Life Stories Association, Estonian Musicology Society, etc.) and others. The CEES has witnessed the advance of a next generation of scholars. During the working period of the CEES, more than 70 new doctoral theses have been defended, 13 doctoral school events were organised. Annual doctoral schools have been organised by the CEES in cooperation with the Graduate School of Culture Studies and Arts (GSCSA), side by side with actions, science schools, and conferences targeted at young people (e.g. HUNTS).

The conference series of the CEES, “Dialogues with Estonia”, has been organised twice a year from December 2015 onwards. Listening to the presentations has always been open to the public free of charge (as have been all other academic events organised by the CEES). The CEES has so far organised sixteen big international and interdisciplinary conferences with a wide and inclusive attendance of academic and non-academic participants:

- 1) Annual conference of the CEES and annual 59th Kreutzwald Days conference “Dialogues – I. Communication, Politics, Text Creation” December 16–17, 2015, in Tartu (programme and abstracts at <http://www.folklore.ee/rl/fo/konve/2015/krzwld/>), 100 participants.
- 2) The opening conference of the CEES “Interdisciplinary Dialogues of Estonian Studies”, April 28–29, 2016, in Tõrve village, Jõgeva County (programme and abstracts at http://www.folklore.ee/CEES/2016/konve_1.htm), 75 participants.
- 3) Annual conference of the CEES and annual 60th Kreutzwald Days conference “Oral and Written in Culture: Connections and Collisions”, December 12–13, 2016, in Tartu (programme and abstracts at <https://folklore.ee/CEES/?id=6&sid=1>), 100 participants.

- 4) Annual Conference of the CEES “Across Borders: Cultures in Dialogue”, April 27–29, 2017, in Tartu (programme and abstracts at <http://www.folklore.ee/rl/fo/konve/AcrossBorders/2017/>), 115 participants.
- 5) Annual conference of the CEES and 61st Kreutzwald Days conference “Variation in Language, Literature, Folklore, and Music”, December 7–8, 2017, in Tartu (programme and abstracts at https://www.folklore.ee/CEES/2017/akonve_e.htm), 160 participants.
- 6) Spring Conference of the CEES “Let Us Be Europeans, But Also Become Estonians! Dialogues with Estonia”, April 27–28, 2018, in Rakvere (programme and abstracts at <https://www.folklore.ee/CEES/2018/kevad/>), 70 participants.
- 7) Annual Conference of the CEES “On the Move: Migration and Diasporas”, November 29–December 1, 2018, in Tartu (programme and abstracts at <https://www.folklore.ee/CEES/migrationdiaspora2018/>), 130 participants.
- 8) Annual Conference of the CEES “Mythology of Metamorphoses: Comparative & Theoretical Perspectives”, June 10–13, 2019, in Tartu (programme and abstracts at <https://www.folklore.ee/rl/fo/konve/2019/mytholog/>), 90 participants.
- 9) Annual Conference of the CEES “Perception and Performativity in Arts and Culture in the Age of Technological Change”, September 5–7, 2019, in Tartu (programme and abstracts at <https://www.folklore.ee/CEES/2019/performance/>), 80 participants.
- 10) Annual Conference of the CEES “Between Individual and Collective Trauma”, March 12–13, 2020, in Tartu (programme and abstracts at <http://www.folklore.ee/rl/fo/konve/2020/trauma/>), 40 participants.
- 11) Annual Conference of the CEES “Dialoogid Eestiga: Kaljujoonistest robootikani”, October 20–21, 2020, in MS Teams (programme and abstracts at <https://folklore.ee/CEES/2020/dialoogideestiga/kava.pdf>), 70 participants.
- 12) Annual Conference of the CEES “Arvo Pärt – Texts and Contexts”, October 15–16, 2021, in Arvo Pärt Centre in Laulasmaa (programme and abstracts at <https://www.arvopart.ee/arvo-pardi-keskus/keskusest/konverents/>), 55 participants.
- 13) Annual Conference of the CEES “Ilmar Laaban. Luule on ülim ehmatust”, December 9–10, 2021, in Tartu (programme and abstracts at <https://www.kirmus.ee/laaban-100/>), 40 participants.
- 14) Annual Conference of the CEES “Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity in Language and Culture”, May 12–13, 2022, in Tartu (programme and abstracts at <https://www.folklore.ee/CEES/2022/>), 125 participants.
- 15) Annual Conference of the CEES “Nature and Culture in the Rituals, Narratives and Beliefs”, September 18–22, 2022, in Tartu (programme and abstracts at <https://www.folklore.ee/rl/fo/bbs/2022/>), 90 participants.

16) Seven Years Milestone CEES Conference “Dialogues with Estonia: New Beginnings”, February 15–16, 2022, in Tartu (programme and abstracts at <https://folklore.ee/CEES/2023/finaal/>), 70 participants.

Annual conferences have enjoyed great popularity; they enable different working groups to present their findings and foster a discussion of highlighted topical issues.

Another important outlet for the CEES results is the popular media, where Estonian and multilingual data and research results are frequently published in print, presented on the radio, television, and on the internet, using the established channels and popular formats (ERR Novaator (<https://www.err.ee/>), Vikerraadio “Keelekõrv”, “Keelenõu”, “Galileo”, “Huvitaja”, Klassikaraadio) and creating new ones (poster presentations, roll-up-posters, flyers, lectures on the media, podcasts, blogs). Novel and attractive means of popularisation are being used in communicating with the public, e.g. data visualisation tools, GIS applications, etc. Workshops for various educational, age, occupational, ethnic, and other groups have been organised (training for nursery teachers, Estonian language teachers).



Figure 1. Researchers of the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies at the spring conference “Let us be Europeans, but also become Estonians! Dialogues with Estonia”, in Rakvere in April 2018. Photograph: Alar Madisson.

The CEES has created several new research opportunities in building the infrastructure needed for effective functioning. More precisely, CEES has supported mutual data and knowhow use, developing opportunities for analysing heterogeneous and variable phenomena (e.g. humour, singing culture, speech-music studies), providing IT solutions and novel analysing possibilities for literary science, poetics, folklore, and other disciplines, developing opportunities for research directions not focused on so far in Estonia (e.g. gender studies, contemporary studies), fostering research in the areas of migration and diaspora studies, and enabling cooperation between researchers from different countries (e.g. to compare the occurrence of the same processes and influential factors in different groups, to observe similarities and differences).

All these outlets and actions provide strong evidence to the fact that the CEES stands in constant close dialogue with the broader public and its aims, and that the actions and results of the CEES are motivated by the needs of a broader knowledge-based society.

Research activities during the seven years of the CEES have offered new innovative and interdisciplinary approaches to societally salient problems, integrating insights from (computational) linguistics, literature, folkloristics, philosophy, music studies. The CEES is a unique research centre both on local (Estonian) and on international level due to its integrated, interdisciplinary, and careful study of a culture's past and present, making it possible to develop models for understanding cultural processes that would apply not only for the Estonian society but also globally on a larger scale. The CEES has enabled successful international cooperation and dialogue with partners and associated members. Well-reputed foreign experts were included in the working groups (also in the leading position), bringing added value to the already existing expertise. The CEES has thus jumpstarted a close collaboration between R&D institutions within and outside of Estonia and thus enabled insightful generalisations of more global nature.

The CEES was launched with enthusiasm and energy that carries on into the present day and beyond that. A proof of this spirit was the pre-CEES conference held already before the results of the funding applications were announced, in December 2015, to bring together the interdisciplinary fields and point at opportunities for collaboration. All subsequent actions have built on that initial enthusiasm, and this will no doubt carry us on to the future.