

The XIVth Finno-Ugristics Congress in Tartu

From 18–23 August 2025 the XIVth international Finno-Ugristics Congress (CIFU – *Congressus Internationalis Fenno-Ugristarum*, webpage <https://cifu14.ut.ee/?lang=et>) was held in Tartu. This is the world's largest and oldest regularly convened scholarly event devoted to Finno-Ugric topics. The congresses have taken place every five years since 1960, moving from one country to another. At first the congresses rotated between Hungary, Finland and the Soviet Union; newly-independent Estonia was added later, and instead of the Soviet Union, Russia played the role of CIFU host. As the 2020 congress was postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic, in 2022 CIFU was organised for the first time in a non-Finno-Ugric country, at the University of Vienna in Austria.

Estonia has hosted the congress twice: in 1970 in Tallinn and in 2000 in Tartu. Therefore this year's CIFU took place in Estonia for the third time, and for the second time in Tartu. The congress has taken place twice in Budapest as well (in 1960 and 1975), but the capital of Hungary will soon outdistance Tartu: the next, the XVth CIFU in 2030, will take place in Budapest, at Eötvös Lorándi University (ELTE).

The main organiser of CIFU XIV was the Institute for Estonian and General Linguistics of the University of Tartu, where all of the congress's proceedings took place. The president of the congress was Gerson Klumpp, professor of Finno-Ugric languages.

Participants arrived at the congress from various places in the world. The geography of the represented states shows clearly that research on Finno-Ugric topics is not limited to the traditional Finno-Ugric lands. Researchers from the following states participated in the congress: Austria, Bangladesh, Estonia, Holland, Italy, Japan, Canada, Lithuania, Latvia, Norway, Poland, France, Sweden, Germany, Finland, Czech Republic, Ukraine, Hungary, USA, Russia (online), United Kingdom. It is an interesting fact that the flag of Bangladesh was represented at CIFU for the first time.

The five intensive days of the congress were filled with diverse academic content; excursions took place on the sixth day. In addition to numerous paper presentations, the congress schedule included a roundtable on introducing Finno-Ugristics to the public, book presentations and two evening receptions. On the working days of the congress, five plenary addresses were delivered: by Kristiina Ross (Estonia), Jussi Ylikoski (Finland/Norway), Ágnes Lukács (Hungary), Eszter Ruttkay-Miklián (Hungary) and Valts Ernštreits (Latvia).

In her plenary address on the opening day of the congress, which was entitled “Challenges of Standardizing a Small Baltic Finnic Language (Until the End of the 18th Century): The Case of Estonian” Estonian Language Institute linguist Kristiina Ross used the example of the Estonian language to examine trials that attended the standardisation of small Finno-Ugric languages up to the end of the 18th century. In his plenary address entitled “On Contemporary Research into Uralic Grammar”, Jussi Ylikoski, professor at the University of Turku and associate professor at the Saami higher education institution in Kautokeinos (Norway), contemplated the current state of research on the grammar of Uralic languages. Ágnes Lukács, professor of cognitive science at the Technical and Economic University of Budapest, spoke in her presentation entitled “The Construction of Hungarian Grammar: Insights from Language Acquisition Research” on the grammatical structure of the Hungarian language from the perspective of language acquisition research. Eszter Ruttkay-Miklián, senior researcher at the Ethnological Institute of the Humanities Research Centre in Budapest focused her presentation, “The Legacy of Éva Schmidt. A Lifework on, to and for the Khanty” on the lifework of Éva Schmidt and publicising her legacy. The last plenary presentation, on the last day of the congress, entitled “Building a Future for Livonian” was given by Valts Ernštreits, director of the Livonian Institute of the University of Latvia, Livonian linguist and language activist; he spoke of the Livonians’ successful efforts toward the preservation of identity and language and building a future for the Livonian language.

There were 19 thematic symposia in the congress’s program, a poster presentation section and a general section, which gathered presentations for which no separate symposium was planned. Approximately 250 presentations were given in the symposia. Most of the participants were physically present, but ten to thirty participated on-line. The latter included the few researchers from Russia who took part in the congress as independent researchers.

Over half of the symposia focused on linguistics, which is not surprising, for linguistics has dominated in the previous congresses. Of course, other areas of ethnic scholarship were also represented. Thus in the symposium “Transdisciplinary Approaches to Research on the Human Past” 12 presentations on history and archaeology were given, but 32 presentations on ethnology, religion and folklore were presented across four separate symposia. In addition, two sections examined the balancing of power relations and hierarchies in Finno-Ugric research and ideologies in the preservation and development of minor

languages, including language policies and planning. In the general section there were presentations on very diverse topics: the Finno-Ugric world view and literature, etymology and onomastics, multilingualism and many additional interesting matters.

The Estonian Literary Museum was represented at the congress by a distinguished delegation. Our colleagues organised and participated in several symposia. Mari Väina was one of the organisers of the symposium “Transdisciplinary Approaches to Studies of the Human Past”, where specialists from diverse areas, including archaeology, genetics, linguistics and folkloristics joined forces in research on humanity’s past. Janika Oras and Taive Särg initiated a symposium entitled “Traditional Creation and Modern Experience in Folk Music Revival”, which examined contemporary ways of presenting traditional music and related experiences. Natalia Ermakov, Nikolay Kuznetsov and Sergey Troitskiy organised a symposium entitled “The Winter in Finno-Ugric Cultures”.

The following presentations were contributed by colleagues at the Estonian Literary Museum: Aado Lintrop (“The Motif of Rebirth in Mansi Folk Tales”); Andres Kuperjanov (“Solar Eclipses in the Finnic-Ugric Traditions”); Andrus Tins and Reet Hiiemäe (“Finno-Ugric Worldviews in the Changing World of Technology”); Helen Kõmmus (“The Traditional Music Features and Revival Aspects at Estonian and Finnish Folk Music Festivals”); Helina Harend, Mari Väina and Risto Järv (“Family Terms in Estonian Runosongs and Fairy Tales”); Janika Oras with Triin Rätsep (“A Touch That Stays with you: Reviving a Traditional Singing Wedding in South Estonia”); Liina Saarlo (“Leelo and a Leaf Flute. Representatives of Estonian Traditional Music on Stage at the 2nd Half of the 20th Century”); Mare Kõiva with Tatsiana Valodzina (“Healing Charms and Healing with Animals”); Mari Väina along with Kati Kallio, Frog and Antti Kanner (“Historical Layers of Finnic Oral Poetry”); Marin Laak (“Cultural Resilience and Networks of the Estonian Diaspora: The Example of the Australian Forest University”); Natalia Ermakov (“Songs and Laments on a Winter Theme: Analysis of the Material Recorded during Field Studies”); Nikolai Anisimov (“Winter in the Mythological Beliefs of the Udmurts”); Olha Petrovych and Liina Saarlo with Serhii Petrovych (“Fog as a Symbol and Physical Phenomenon in Ukrainian Folk Songs and Estonian Runosongs: A Comparative Study”); Taive Särg with Marion Selgall and Helena Trei (“About the Process of Singing and the Conception of Authenticity in the 21st-Century Estonian Regilaul Tradition”).

A part of one day of the conference was held at the Literary Museum. The CIFU special panel entitled “Finno-Ugric Language and Culture in the Research and Archival Field of the Estonian Literary Museum” took place there. Participants in the congress had the opportunity to get acquainted with the archives and collections of the Museum and publications on Finno-Ugric folklore and religion, as well as listening to a brief lecture on research on Finno-Ugric languages

and cultures at the Estonian Literary Museum and to Finno-Ugric poetry. At the same time, participants could view an exhibit entitled “...in Between” of works by Udmurt artist Zoja Lebedeva, prepared specially for the congress and Mari design artist Natalja Lill’s exhibit “Life Is Beauty – Beauty Is Life”.

Most of the Finno-Ugric peoples live in Russia, and previously scholars from Russian universities and research centres have actively participated in the congresses. CIFU took place at the home of the eastern linguistic kin in 1985 (during the Soviet era) in Komi country in Sökövtari and in 2005 with the Mari in Joškar-Ola. Due to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian researchers cannot travel to Estonia at present, and institutional collaboration with Russian research institutions has been broken off. The war that caused this was already underway during the previous CIFU (2022) and conditions have not improved in the intervening period. The preliminary shock and perplexity seemed to have passed; researchers have resigned themselves to the situation and manage despite restricted opportunities, although without free interaction with colleagues in Russia, attendance at conferences there and field work in the lands of the eastern language kin.

Personal contacts and interaction with colleagues in Russia have also been disturbed. The Russian state had previously intervened in international Finno-Ugric cooperation, but now this intervention has been amplified. Repressive laws and political restrictions in Russia activate self-censorship in researchers, because interaction with scholars from “hostile states” is not regarded positively by the regime. However, the previous or potential readiness for cooperation on the part of the eastern colleagues might also suffer regardless of state regulation, because their own ideological views and attitude toward the war may conform to the official position; this also means an end to their interaction with western scholars.

CIFU brought scholars together in Tartu, offering them the opportunity to interact and discuss directly and without impediment. Despite today’s excellent means of interacting over the web, scholars continue to need direct meetings and interactions: this is how synergy is born, and this also gives a stronger sense of security that Finno-Ugric scholarly life will continue despite the major changes of the past years. It was a joy to see many young scholars participate in the congress and Estonian university students were included as a supporting committee in the organisation of the congress. The congress was a success in every way.

As concerns the inclusion of Finno-Ugric colleagues in Russia and their participation in international collaboration, it is unfortunately unknown how future interaction with them will turn out. Today one cannot predict that collaboration will be restored in the next few years. Perhaps the next CIFU five years from now in Budapest will show whether or how the situation has changed.

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