

Estonian Minister of Education Jaak Aaviksoo:

The relationship of the majority culture of Estonia with multiculturalism and equality

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Honourable President, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

We had an introductory note from **President Halonen** which believed in Europe, recognizing the problems, traumas in the past and in the present Europe, and then a keynote presentation which draw a rather doom picture of the present-day Europe if everything continues as it has been so far. It was a presentation which I felt emotionally from a man with pain in his heart.

And we have to listen to these messages. My first question is: is this pain for Europe and because of Europe? Or is it a broader, global issue? Can we address these problems in the very same way in Africa, China, the United States, Singapore, anywhere in the world? Is it a global problem or really just a European problem?

Frankly speaking, I do not know. But I admit there's a European specificity, definitely embedded in this situation. It is our specific past, 2,000 years if you like, the 20th century's two world wars and the willingness to build a multicultural and a better Europe. I believe Europeans are sincere about it, regardless of whether they belong to any kind of majority or any kind of minority. They are equally and sincerely interested in building a better Europe. If this is true, then it is not a problem of some bad willing construction and architecture. It's about our ability to build coherence across societies to tackle the problems we face. This is embedded in lack of empathy on one hand, but also lack of knowledge, lack of understanding of how this society works, psychology works, a number of disciplines involved. So this is a challenge that I think is worth trying. That is my first message: I do believe we have a problem, that the European people are sincerely willing to solve it; and let us try to find what might be the first steps in that direction.

We still need a little bit more insight about what we mean when we talk about majorities and minorities and how this problem is going to evolve. At the end of the day, can we think of a society where there are no majorities and no minorities at all? Can we develop power architecture, a society where this issue is an empty concept, where we do not need it? Again, I do not know but I can work in that direction, I am willing to do that. Regarding the majorities and the minorities, the modern society is more diverse than it was 100 years ago and 20 or 30 years ago. What does that mean? It means that all of us belong to different groups of people at the same time, we have multidimensional identities. And not always,

none of us belongs always to a majority. We all have some minority experience. It may be an ethnic, it also may be a linguistic, religious, subcultural minority where you are ethnically the same, language wise and religion wise the same but you are a hippy.

In order to understand the tension between majorities and minorities let us think ourselves in a position where we are a minority ourselves. Everyone can find a personal experience; feelings subordinated, suppressed, and remember how we tackled that problem. Moving in that direction, building a broader societal understanding of what it means to be a minority, from a personal experience, is a way forward.

Now a few words about Estonians. In very many respect, first and foremost from the linguistic and ethnic point of view, Estonians have been a minority throughout the history. Throughout a written history of about 1,000 years at least, we have always been a minority. There is a deeply embedded minority self-identity to the point that in recent decades, not even the last two or three when Estonia regained its independence but before that, under communist rule, in the 1980s, not jokingly, the Estonians emotionally felt as being on the verge of eradication with russification policies being introduced starting from the kindergarten. The Estonian language has been the refuge of our identity. All the rest have been merged somehow. If you look at the Estonian faces you see the Swedes and the Poles and the Russians and the Germans being represented. There is no genetic problem. The oldest of refuges is the linguistic one. In a way, this nation has developed over the past 100 years a certain existential fear of being eradicated, not being able to sustain their national identity, best represented by the language. So for us this reconstituted republic of Estonia is a survival issue.

Not all Estonians, by their place of residence are Estonians linguistically. Roughly one third of the population is of different ethnic and linguistic background. Historically, we tend to address them as a Russian-speaking minority. By in large, there are Finns, Americans, Chinese, a number, but the big proportion, 25-30% is Russian-speaking minority. We do have a lot of problems, a lot of tensions, intolerable gaps, unemployment. Among Estonian-speaking population roughly 6.5 – 7% is unemployed; if you take the Russian-speaking minority, double that number. Income wise, the gap is 15-20%. A number of other statistical features show that there is a big problem. How to overcome this problem? There is no good solution in a short term but there has to be a good solution in a long term. What does long term mean? If we are good, it means two generations; if we are excellent, 20-30 years. You cannot solve this problem in 5-10 years, in no country. But the key point is you have to move in this direction and create an impression that it is getting better all the time. Tomorrow will be better than today and in 2-3 years' time, the situation will be even better. That gives hope both to the majority and the minority. This is the key feature.

How to do that? I agree, we need action. The fast solution is to teach all non-ethnic Estonians good Estonian language. An average Estonian does not have any problems with a partner, a friend, a colleague, a neighbour who is fluent in Estonian, regardless of his ethnic

background, family name, even racial qualities. Estonians are very demanding and want an excellent quality in language, almost like the French. But if you do so, you exercise pressure, you dominate. That is not the way forward. If you cannot teach them the best Estonian possible then how to move forward?

Why is the language issue so important? One of the reasons is the existential fear of Estonians but the other problem is creating a common communication space. Groups of people, minorities and majorities, are more too often than they tend to believe defined by a common communication space. They communicate between each other, they do not listen what other groups are saying, thinking, wanting. It is a controversial issue. If you want to maintain their identity, cultural values, all kinds of new things, we have to leave them alone in their cultural environment, communicative space. If we want to breach the gaps, we have to communicate with them from a bigger group of people, the majority towards the minority; it is always a problem, a source of tension.

There is a strategic way forward. Helsinki is more multicultural than Tallinn although we have roughly 45 % of non-Estonians and 55 % of Estonians. Helsinki is more diverse, racially, culturally. We have two groups, you have more. When the time goes by, what we see and understand in Estonia emotionally, on everyday, not political level that the more different people we have, more distant by religion, language, race from Estonians, and our neighbours, the better. When we see the global trends, we see that neighbours are coming closer together all across Europe. In a way, the old tensions of 100 years ago that brought us to great conflicts, disappeared first and foremost not because of one side starting to love the other side but because of external pressures. External global pressures bring us together and we are much more familiar with our minorities with whom we have lived close to each other for hundreds of years and also vis-à-vis the new immigrants. The globalization is an external pressure that forces us to develop a viable, stable, not dominating multiculturalism but a functioning multiculturalism, thereby building a new meta-identity for all of us.

Some countries have been more successful than others. Worldwide there are excellent examples of truly multicultural communities. Take Singapore. A wonderful example of a peaceful coexistence of very diverse communities with their problems that can be much more serious than that we have in Europe. On the other hand, a number of functioning models of division of power and equal rights in the respective societies. Concerning ruling coming from the majority dominance over minorities, a solution will come to us if we have willingness to move in that direction. Because of our reaction to external global pressure that forces us to work together more efficiently than we have done so far.

I fully agree with those colleagues who emphasized the fact that there is a huge hidden potential concerning minorities. Empowering minorities to the extent they are capable is an enormous source of economic and social progress. We all have experiences of some people who have been in an uncomfortable situation or position for objective external circumstances, and given an opportunity, access to education, they have advanced very fast,

ten times faster than under the usual conditions. We have to recognize this huge potential hidden in these minorities, especially in a situation with diminishing populations like almost everywhere in Europe, at least in Estonia.

About the experiential education. Education for me is first and foremost learning a language. Learning a language in a broader sense, learning a way to communicate. This learning of the language has to take the key position in education, meaning also the language of talking to different people. Modern education is not what it was 100 years ago. The classic continental European understanding as a body of knowledge that the professor knows 100%, the student knows 60% and the first-year student knows 5 %; and the higher you climb, the more you know - no, it is not the case. Knowledge is everywhere, it is developing, and different skills, personal, individual skills are much more important. We have to gradually move away from the functional education that has been emphasized as the nation building. Nation building was one of the reasons of the great conflicts of the 20th century. Instead of the nation building in a classical sense we must build a community.

Last but not least. If we do not address the fundamental questions of the fate of the liberal democracy that Europe has cherished so far and still does, then we have within this concept tackled a problem that is being addressed by **Veijo Baltzar**, the problem of loneliness, that is the co-product of individualism of the ethical concept of the human being as the highest value. We have to address this issue. If you want to move away from this loneliness, this external pressure of individuals who are so small, so minor compared to the million people around, that we have to return to the old, pre-Reformation community values: family, neighbours, etc. Otherwise we fail. And I am afraid we would also fail in respect to these younger colleagues who represented their sadness, their loneliness and external pressures. So reconsidering what Martin Luther started 500 years ago in a new context is also one of the ethical musts we face in Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen, I was maybe not saying much how we do in Estonia but I tried to tell you that we are trying hard and I believe it is a worthwhile effort, not only in Estonia and Finland and Europe, but on a global scale. Thank you for your attention.