

Lehte Ilves

Did you learn anything new during your visit to Läänemaa?

The people I met here are happy and optimistic, they all do something good and necessary and further their lives. Seeing them was a pleasure. I did not hear any moaning – there are many places I have visited where people are not so positive.

I am leaving with happiness in my heart as this visit has been a positive experience for me.

Local government leaders in Läänemaa are not in favour of merging local governments. What is your opinion in this matter?

Every region is unique. The same applies to Läänemaa, where different settlements are separated from each other by swamps and marshes and create a different situation.

The issue in the administrative reform is: How will people receive the services that the state is obliged to offer and that they all pay for equally with their income tax, regardless of the local government? Local governments are the providers of these services. If the local government cannot do it, then they have failed to perform their duties.

It is not that someone is just forcing rural municipalities to merge. No, no one is forcing anyone.

The pressure is coming from elsewhere. People want to live in places that have a good school, kindergarten, hobby clubs. People make their own choices. If the rural municipality does not offer what they want, parents say: I cannot send my child to the school here, so I am leaving.

The pressure to merge does not come from the state. There is nothing wrong with the opinion that a bigger and stronger local government would be better. It is supported by the wish to keep people living in the country. If people do not get what they should be getting for their income tax, they go to places where they get what they need. This is one of the reasons of urbanisation. Rural municipalities need to understand that they will lose their people if they are unable to keep them there.

What is your opinion of regional policy in the light of your visit to Läänemaa?

The current problems are not associated with the Regional Minister, but the fact that some duties cannot be performed because not enough money is received in taxes. For example, the road to Nõva is still covered in gravel and it will not be asphalted any time soon.

The economy is slowing down throughout Europe, but when we come out of this, Nõva will have to get decent infrastructure so it will be well connected to the centres surrounding it.

However, a positive tendency, where more and more people move to the country because of health or security or other reasons, can also be seen in Estonia. This process must be supported to avoid Estonia turning into a nature park that only has the capital, Tallinn. We must focus on access roads and infrastructure.

What changed in the world after 8 August when Russia attacked Georgia? Should we

worry about our security? After all, we are not in the same situation as Georgia.

No, we are definitely not in the same situation as Georgia! It is a completely different world.

We have been building our state for 17 years in the knowledge that we do not need to have any military concerns about our neighbour. We have been assured that we are living in the 21st century, that the 20th century is in the past and Russia no longer poses a military threat.

After 8 August this year, people are shocked not only in Estonia, but also in Europe and America – aggression in 21st century Europe is possible. We have to draw our conclusions once we have recovered. If the red line has been crossed, we have to start looking differently at our defence expenditure, our own contribution to NATO.

Life is not what it used to be, a change has taken place and we have to think about it long and hard. It is more than just a military issue. We also have to think more about our energy security. It is not good if we cannot react to certain activities because the space that we act in is limited as a result of our energy dependency. This is bad in itself.

Freedom means that you can do what you think is right based on your values. However, if you have to consider that maybe you will then not have any heating in the winter, it means that your freedom is restricted.

After the attack on Georgia, people in Estonia started saying that NATO has no plan for the Baltic States. What does it mean?

NATO has not thought for 17 or 18 years that there could be military aggression in Europe. However, the alliance does have general plans.

It is also irrelevant to say that everything will be over by the time NATO gets here to help us.

No country can gather its forces quickly by the border of another country and go unnoticed. It is a very long process and should it happen, then NATO will be ready and waiting.

Are you in favour of establishing NATO bases in Estonia?

Every military unit of Estonia is a NATO base, which makes the discussion of bases irrelevant.

The condition of our airports and ports is important at present. The question is whether we are able to receive our allies and not whether there will be bases.

The Government is currently struggling with the budget – where should they not make any concessions?

At the recent opening session of the Riigikogu, I reminded the Parliament and the Government that the decisions they make must consider the needs of Estonia tomorrow and in ten years' time. I think that the areas and expenditure that concern the security of our state should not be considered for concessions. There is some room for cuts in election promises that are often seen as dogmas, but that **MUST** be revised by every reasonable person when circumstances change.

From the practical point of view, it would be reasonable not to cut the costs of projects where Estonia invests 25% and the European Union 75%.

So far, the Government has been working on positioning. The standpoints voiced by ministries and political parties have mainly been parts of the fight about who gets more.