

According to the Estonian Constitution, the state treats all citizens equally, irrespective of their sex, age, nationality or confession.

Therefore, in general terms, I tend to agree with the well-known historian David Vseviiov – who is not of Estonian nationality – who some time ago in the newspaper *Eesti Päevaleht* pleaded the Estonian state not to make any abstract action plans in order to engage or integrate non-Estonians as a large group.

Instead of a group, we should be dealing with people.

If the state – and if all of us, every one of us – starts to think of non-Estonians as quite ordinary people, our fellow countrymen; if we stop treating them as people with special needs – for whom a different kind of policy must be adopted, be it in the field of education, employment, or something else – we will already have taken a long step in the right direction.

Estonian state and the people of Estonia bear no guilt or debt to the non-Estonians residing here – neither historically nor in the present day.

To the contrary – Estonian governments have always spent abundant funds of money, time and energy in order to help non-Estonians living in Estonia.

For years, Estonia has handled these people as a socially sensitive group. It has been understood that for many of our present fellow countrymen, the restoration of Estonia's independence was not the fulfilment of their heart's desire, that part of their identity and outlook collapsed with the Soviet Union.

Estonian state has purposefully laboured to help non-Estonians get involved in the daily life of our society.

The absence of guilt or blame is mutual. The Russians, Ukrainians, and other nationalities living here bear no personal guilt and have no debts to redeem to Estonians.

The debt to be redeemed is the debt of a criminal regime that already belongs to the past. The blame lies with the officials who were implementing the policies of that former state for decades in Moscow, as well as in Tallinn, and never cared for the opinion of the people – be they Estonians, Russians, Ukrainians, Latvians, Georgians, or any other nationality.

Their decisions hurled millions of people across the Soviet Union, never considering the consequences of such mass migration, the severed roots and crushed national identities.

Yet those are the consequences that many countries, including Estonia, have to face today. As we know, this is a prolonged and complicated process, which sometimes may prove very difficult.

And there are counter-actions. The country that has declared itself the legal successor of the Soviet Union clearly dislikes its former subjects developing into conscious and free citizens of

an independent country.

Instead, attempts are made to maintain their subject-status, to imprison them in the past, where perverse ideologies ruled human lives. Where a human life or health had no value, where an individual was owned by the state and the party.

A free democratic country, based on each individual's freedom of choice, responsibility and the civic society, does not treat its citizens as a faceless, easily manipulated crowd.

It seems to me that Estonia's inhabitants of other nationalities desire no such special treatment that often almost verges on patronising. Free people need no guardians.

Furthermore, special approaches only aggravate the non-Estonians' feeling of otherness, of being different, the feeling that prevents them from becoming similar to the overwhelming majority of Estonia's inhabitants. From becoming bearers of similar values.

I grew up far away from Estonia. It would have felt humiliating for me to be exempted from any duties at school or university on the grounds of my nationality, outlandish name, and different mother tongue.

To the contrary – perhaps because I was different, I wished to be among the best at school. This meant efforts as well as asserting and proving oneself. Integration, if I may say so, which also meant maintaining my cultural identity.

Just like many Russians and other nationalities living in Estonia, I had several identities for many years. The identity of my country of residence, as well as my national identity.

Both needed maintenance, as the young Estonians abroad in 1970s were no longer preserving their Estonianness in the hope of imminent return to their home country.

Still, I can remember no sharp conflict between those different identities, or in other words, no identity crisis.

The absence of crisis may perhaps have resulted from the fact that the fundamental values of my two identities were largely the same.

And therefore – proceeding from my own personal case – I dare recommend that we should, in further integration process, look less at people's nationality and mother tongue, but concentrate rather on values that form the basis of the modern Estonian society.

We could start with the rhetoric. It is strange that on the 18th year of our restored independence, the verbal bastard *muulane* (denoting someone who is other, different, foreign) is still present in our verbiage. In most cases, the *muulane* *mu*
has lived in Estonia all his or her life, and is most probably born here.

Next, we should tackle the mental depoliticisation of communication between different ethnic groups. The mother tongue of an inhabitant of Estonia, any citizen of Estonia, need not automatically be viewed in the context of relations between Estonia and Russia.

A Russian inhabitant of Estonia is not *a priori* a supporter of the politics of the Russian state. Nor is every Estonian automatically a supporter of Andrus Ansip's government.

For citizens of a democratic country, their love of their country is not connected to the personage of the current Prime Minister or President.

We need more openness, understanding and tolerance, or simple respect. At the same time, this means denunciation of deliberate insults and taunts, especially in terms of cultural and linguistic identity.

Estonia can be a home for all its inhabitants only on the condition that those inhabitants care for their home and protect it. And make no attempts to sell it or set fire to it.

In the field of international relations, Estonian society's challenge consists of making all the inhabitants of Estonia feel at home.

We must cast aside the dream that integration should attempt to make everyone in Estonia think alike, feel alike, become Estonians. That is not possible.

Nor is it necessary, as common and shared values outweigh national identity. I have much more in common with a democratically-minded Russian or Ukrainian than an intolerant or dogma-encapsulated Estonian, or an Estonian longing for the guiding hand of a strong leader.

Our main challenge is to preserve and develop a favourable environment, where it is easy for everyone to learn to think and behave as a free individual, a free citizen. A citizen not only in the sense of the Citizenship Act. Also the people of Estonia, all of us, are still learning how to be citizens.

To develop into citizens, we need educators, enthusiasts, opinion leaders. People who would be able to express people's concerns, protect the foundations of free democratic society, and set an example to others.

If even in Russia, with its limited freedom of speech, there are people who risk their personal welfare, job and safety to criticise the authoritarianism, the increasing nationalism and xenophobia, as well as the aggressive mindset of the state, here in Estonia – strangely enough – there are not too many sharing their opinion or expressing support. Or at least, their voices are seldom heard in the Estonian-speaking opinion space.

Also in the troubled nights a year and a half ago, we heard few such voices. If a monument is purposefully used for inciting hostility, including hostility between different nationalities, and disparaging their identity, its removal to a more appropriate location is justified.

There may be several opinions about the matter. This is the way things work in a democratic

society. And I am sorry that the conflict erupted into violence, that it cost us the life of a young man.

At the same time, I am sorry that from the camp of those opposing the decision and actions of the government, no voice was heard saying that looting and injuring the police is criminal, that this is setting fire to your own home.

I hope that the conferences organised in the framework of the Estonian Co-operation Association will push the dialogue into motion. I hope that new leaders of the civic society and advocates of free society will emerge from this audience. I wish you success with all my heart.