

Dear members of the Round Table of Nationalities,
ladies and gentlemen, dear friends.

It sometimes seems to me that some pieces of folk wisdom are not wisdom at all – for instance, the saying that “silence is golden”.

I know this is mainly said to discourage pointless prattling. But sometimes it seems that it is taken too literally. It appears that some topics are embarrassing, or at least awkward, and silence is favoured to discussion.

One of these subjects is the relations between different nationalities in Estonia, or to put it more precisely, our ability and desire to bring out the best in all of our fellow countrymen.

Unfortunately, to this point we have not been too successful in developing a frank discussion about the obstacles that keep us from making maximum use of our combined potential.

The discourse on interethnic relations has been marked by too little rationality. The vacuum has been filled by emotions, fears and stereotypes; sometimes various sociological studies have been interpreted to serve a specific purpose.

All this has prevented us from making progress in our discussions.

For that reason, I hope that the Round Table of Nationalities convened by the Estonian Cooperation Assembly does not repeat the mistakes of the past.

I hope that the Round Table will not come to define the basic nature of the relationship between Estonia’s nationalities in antagonistic terms; that it does not serve as a battlefield where the purported hostility between the Estonian-speaking majority and the Russian-speaking minority is played out.

We know well that this is exactly the picture painted of us in some parts. The concepts of citizenship and ethnicity are deliberately obfuscated – and by doing so, the obfuscators intentionally and consistently insult the tens of thousands of ethnic Russians who have taken Estonian citizenship.

Yet we know that the roots of the different views of Estonia’s past, present and future are not actually of an ethnic stripe. The differences lie in the fact that everyone brings to the table a different knowledge of Estonian history, all of which shapes the view of Estonia as an independent, free, democratic country.

This, I repeat, is not an ethnic conflict. People who abuse the term do not appear to notice, for example, that most parents see the quality and future of the Russian-language education offered in Estonia as a matter of educational policy and what is best for youth – not of ethnic or language policy.

In exactly the same manner, entrepreneurs, sociologists and politicians are realizing that

Estonia needs good international schools for the children of the specialists, teachers, diplomats and others who come to Estonia to work.

This is not a matter of ethnic relations. This is a matter of Estonia's future. This is about jobs, economic well-being, and quality of life of all of the people living in Estonia – the Estonians, Russians, Ukrainians, Finns, Latvians and Swedes – and by extension, Estonia's continued existence.

The world of stereotypes and fears, a closed Estonia – this is not for us.

The globalizing world and freedom of movement across national boundaries pose new challenges for every society but especially for small ones. In our case, it means that the proportions of different ethnic groups and nationalities may change over time, but the tapestry will become even richer.

The question today: are we ready for this? What do we have to do to be better prepared?

I hope that among other institutions and individuals, the Estonian Cooperation Assembly's Round Table of Nationalities will start dealing with these topics, articulating issues and offering solutions.

Dear friends.

Estonia is the sum of the abilities and good will of all of her inhabitants.

If we act judiciously, this diverse community can make all of our lives richer and more secure.

If we act foolishly, the result will be uncertainty, fear and suspicion instead of synergy. But doubt and fear do not attract smart people, new knowledge or investments.

Dear members of the Round Table,

You have the ability to see Estonia with open eyes and hearts. You can start from a clean slate, and you are independent in your activity.

I wish you success and a desire for cooperation.

Thank you.

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BACKGROUND

The Round Table of Nationalities was convened by the Estonian Cooperation Assembly on 26 May 2010. The function of the Round Table is to engage Estonian inhabitants of different ethnicities, mother tongues and nationalities and to advise the President of the Republic where

necessary. The members of the Round Table are appointed personally by the Cooperation Assembly.

The Round Table on Minorities effectively replaces the Estonian President's round table on ethnic minorities, which had served in an advisory capacity.