

Dear friends,

I have invited you here today to initiate a discussion about who we are and where we want to be. It is a discussion on which Estonia's future may partially depend.

The discourse on leaving and returning to Estonia is nothing new. It has spanned a century or even more.

It resurfaced with fresh momentum last year when four repatriating Estonians started the program Talendid Koju (Bring Talent Home) and an Internet site to engage Estonians living abroad.

The relevance of the topic was underscored by the fact that "leaving Estonia" became a major issue around the time of the last elections.

Most of the discourse on "coming back" has thus far been reminiscent of the parable of the two blind men and the elephant. One man thinks the animal is a garden hose; and the other, a house with columns. They are, of course, describing the beast according to the features their hand happens to have touched.

In our case, little is heard from those who have actually ridden on the elephant. We don't hear the voices of those who have lived abroad for a longer period of time and then, for some reason or other, decided to return to Estonia, or to come to Estonia for the first time.

But you are the experts on this topic. You have certainly given much thought to the matter of coming back to Estonia. And perhaps this meeting tonight will produce some of those famous

good Estonian ideas that help make Estonia a better, more open and greater place.

Dear friends,

As I said, you are the experts on this discussion, as you have been here, there, and now here again. This issue will soon be one that nearly all Estonian citizens will grapple with, especially after 1 May, when Estonian citizens started to enjoy all of the freedom of workforce rights throughout the European Union.

Now, finally, we are truly free.

That freedom means that just as others are free to come to Estonia, so, too, are we free to leave Estonia. Soviet-style feudalism has long ended and been forgotten, much like medieval serfdom ended close to 200 years ago.

When Estonia regained independence, the boundary that marked off-limits territory disappeared. Now, with the possibility of working elsewhere in Europe, the last bar over the door is gone.

And who has not thought of the words of Juhani Viiding:

I have wanted to go outside all my life.

What does it mean to me?

It is the soul's only demand

that brings me closer to life.

In other words, I consider it natural that Estonians want to go outside, live and work in some other place, that is, abroad. I feel it is almost essential that we all become more successful, open-minded, that we know ourselves better and be more honest with ourselves.

But there is a flip side. No, not at the level of statistics, demographics or political rhetoric, but in terms of the spirit.

One of the unpleasant things an Estonian – or actually, any person – living abroad experiences is that sometimes miserable feeling of aloneness you feel when an important part of you remains impenetrable to others. Where no one cares the slightest bit or understands about Estonia and everything that the concept of “Estonian” entails in your personality.

Yet many people feel the same thing when they come back to Estonia. They feel that they’re somehow different, that the decision – not always the easiest one – to sever ties, long in the making, and come back to the old country will never be fully understood. That goes for whether you are coming back or arriving in Estonia for the first time. To the place you came from and where your spirit belongs.

People come back to Estonia in very different ways. There are some who have never been here but whose parents are from here. There are those who went temporarily but ended up staying longer. And there are those who went for love or education or work but still came back.

All this is often incomprehensible for those who have never gone or come back. Along with alienation, there is the subconscious fear that the person returning is somehow better, is a competitor or will disturb the peace. Different in any case.

There are so few of us that every person, every compatriot, every Estonian is a talent and a value as such, and should be treasured, not denigrated. That goes for talent that has already blossomed, even if it bloomed abroad. And it also goes for talent still waiting for the right moment.

And what is the alternative? To keep a free people in one spot by force? To tell them not to go away? Or not to come back? Too often I have sensed that sort of peevish, petty attitude. That people shouldn't be allowed to go, and if they have gone, then good riddance.

For a long time now, I have been bothered by the feeling that a disapproving attitude to the idea of inviting one's own countrymen and -women back also reflects an apathetic and hopeless attitude toward the state.

That it is good to be anywhere but here. Or that only losers with no prospects would waste their lives here in Estonia, dreaming of an hour in the spotlight that never comes.

Maybe I am wrong and overstating the case, but I think a few of you have experienced that kind of attitude.

Yet at the same time, I believe that we should rid ourselves as a people of two types of attitudes.

The first attitude is the idea that if you leave Estonia, you betray your homeland. And that it is a patriotic duty to return, almost as if we were not people, but honeybees compelled to return to the hive.

The other attitude is crass materialism, according to which the hope of returning to Estonia becomes a possibility only when the wages here are just as high as they are "there", where the standard of living is currently higher, attitudes are better and quality of life superior.

Economists have long since discovered that from a certain income level and GDP on, one's homeland again becomes attractive to those who left, even if they would experience a significant drop in the standard of living by returning.

Because once a certain level has been attained at home – a level lower than most European countries, incidentally – then other concerns begin to trump income. Friends, familiar foods, beliefs, culture in all senses of the word, climate.

Basically, all these intangibles finally start tipping the scales in favour of home.

Dear friends,

As I said at the beginning, it is not easy to return. Not only because of how you are received but also because of who you are.

Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again*, at least the title, refers to the fact that once you have left your home and discovered a new, possibly bigger world, you will start to equate homecoming with failure, and a return to the old and inferior.

An admission that you did not succeed, did not make it.

Think about Jesus' parable about the prodigal son. The younger son journeys abroad and experiences failure. Coming home, he finds that in spite of everything his father still loves him. Only his elder brother was upset: he had stayed home and worked his father's fields but feels neglected. That consequently he must not be considered a talent.

All of this can be and should be understood on a human level. But I prefer to view it all according to Heraclitus, who said that you can't step twice in the same river. What he meant was, by that time it's no longer the same river.

The person himself has changed during his absence, and Estonia has changed. The Estonia that the person left five, ten, 20 or more years ago, is another place now: more exciting, constantly reinventing itself, surprising.

Estonia still needs much work, albeit, I feel, more in terms of values than the material level. It needs more tolerance, openness and attitudes. Less of what one person has called “sour-faced Estonia”.

But everyone who comes back sees Estonia for the first time. We discover it as a different place. Estonia is changing constantly, and it is within our power as the people here to make it what we want it to be.

Dear friends, we have to want more, aspire to greater things. Any small nation, to say nothing of one with as complicated a past as Estonians, have a well-developed instinct for self-preservation.

The other side of that coin is provincialism and mistrust of anything that is even a little different.

If that happens -- be it in politics, culture or the street -- it starts to pose a threat to democracy, pluralism and social diversity.

In my speeches, I have often criticized our fellow citizens for taking the path of least resistance or adopting a whining tone.

Instead of whining, Estonia should be made a more open and better place. This is within our power.

It is thanks to our oft-derided size that we are capable of more impressive feats than a larger country where people's contacts are largely confined to their own community.

It is not possible elsewhere, no matter how diligent and talented we might be. There we ourselves must do the adapting, not our surroundings. There we adapt, often giving up

something of ourselves in the process, in order to fit in and conform.

All that finally culminates in a reason and an occasion to again step into the same river, realizing that it is only possible here in Estonia.

Dear friends,

I would like to thank you for going. And even more for coming back.

Long live Estonia!