



Estonia

Tõnis Lukas
Minister of Education and Research



Tõnis Lukas was appointed as Minister of Education and Research of the Republic of Estonia in April 2007. Tõnis was previously Minister of Education between March 1999 and January 2002. Tõnis Lukas was member of the Riigikogu (Estonian Parliament) in 1995-1996, in 1999, and in 2003-2007. He joined the Riigikogu after being Teacher at Rõngu School, Director of the Estonian National Museum, as well as Mayor of the City of Tartu between 1996 and 1997. Tõnis Lukas belongs to Pro Patria and Res Publica Union.

He was educated at the University of Tartu and holds a MA degree in History. Tõnis is the member of the Estonian Students' Society, Estonian Heritage Society, The Learned Estonian Society, and Estonian Vocational Education Promotion Society. He is married with two daughters and a son.

Inclusive education through linguistic and cultural integration

In addition to traditional interpretations and tasks of inclusive education, small countries have something unique to deal with that is related to linguistic and cultural integration. It is very important for a nation whose population is only a bit above million to develop and protect its language and culture as nobody else could help us in performing this task.

At the same time, we have to accomplish another important task and ensure that other nations would feel themselves empowered and competitive while living in Estonia. We must be able to integrate national minorities with other linguistic and cultural backgrounds into our society and culture. The number of different ethnic groups living in Estonia is 126 and they form 31% of the total population. The largest national minority is Russians who form 26% of the population, followed by considerably smaller communities – Ukrainians (2% of population) as well as Finns and Byelorussians (both of them 1% of population).

Education system is without doubt one of the key factors in fostering the integration process in the society: on one side education promotes the skills of official language of non-Estonians and on the other side it directs the socialisation process and community life. Education creates equal opportunities for all our people in order for them to lead their life in dignity and enjoy the success.

The long-term objective of the linguistic integration is to ensure that all permanent residents of Estonia are able to communicate in official language which guarantees the equality in competitiveness. To achieve this objective, we should pay special attention at all levels of education to the Estonian language teaching as well as to the subject-teaching in Estonian, as young people achieve better language skills irrespective of their linguistic environment especially when the language is also used as the language of instruction of subject lessons.

The language immersion programme, whose development and application were inspired by the experience of other countries, especially that of Canada and Finland, and which we now in turn dare to recommend to others, has also been of much help in teaching Estonian to the minority groups. Language immersion as



the form additive bilingual education provides students with equally good skills both in the mother tongue as well as in another language. At the moment, approximately 7% of students in schools where the language of instruction is Russian study according to the language immersion programmes. On 1 September, 2007 the upper secondary schools with non-Estonian language of instruction started the transition to partial teaching of subjects in Estonian that is also one of the forms of bilingual education. By the 2011/2012 academic year the schools will guarantee Estonian-language instruction in at least 60% of the minimum allowable educational content at the upper secondary school level. In the case of the remaining 40% of the curriculum the schools themselves will determine the language of instruction.

An inclusive society and education system respect the interest of other nations for education in their own language and preservation of their own culture – Estonia is one of the few European states where the state-financed and regulated school network in languages of national minorities is preserved at the basic school and partially also at the upper secondary school level (currently almost 20% of the students are studying in schools where the language of instruction is Russian).

A more universal task of our education system is to create conditions for our society to be competitive in the world. We must be able to integrate ourselves into the world, understand the languages and cultures of other countries and nations and appreciate the diversity of Europe and the world as an important value.