

*President of the Republic and presidential candidate Toomas Hendrik Ilves presents his view of Estonian society, the state and the role of the president in the third decade of Estonia's second era of independence.*

We recently marked the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the restoration of Estonian independence. We rejoiced over our freedom regained, and in our minds, we replayed the events leading up and following re-independence. "Where was I, what did I do, what did I feel?" many asked. Many probably also thought along the lines of "how much did I have back then" and "what do I have now" and categorized themselves accordingly either among the winners or "victims" of independence. This is an exceedingly human trait. In fact that is what anniversaries are for, to take time out for a moment and to identify oneself with the past in this manner.

Today is an ordinary workday again, the beginning of the third decade of the new Estonia, and thus we should think of what will become of us, our families, friends, colleagues from work, our hometown or home parish, and our homeland.

## **A closer-knit, industrious Estonia**

A good acquaintance of mine said a few days ago that if every person living in Estonia did even one little thing better than yesterday, the country would immediately become better, the state would immediately rise a notch, society would become stronger, and people would have more pride. It sounds simple, even a little naïve, yet it is quite accurate. After all, Estonia is the sum of all of the actions and omissions, dreams and disappointments of everyone connected with the country.

Now, in the third decade of independence, we face different tasks than we have to this point, above all in terms of intangible values, but also practical concerns, such as strengthening the social fabric and the foundation of governance.

Looking to the future a bit more ambitiously, we would do well to hearken to the ideas recently expressed by Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz in the *Financial Times*, where he wrote that countries with solid public finances should see the current chaos as a chance to reach a new level of development. We do not have to match or overtake forerunners at all costs, or attempt to snare a higher position in some table of rankings. But we should be aware that our credibility and capability does tend to be evaluated outside Estonia on the basis of indexes – demographic forecasts, economic freedom indexes or the number of A's in our credit rating.

On the basis of the above, I think Estonia facing two central tasks in the decade of independence that has just started. First of all, Estonia must act like a mature democracy, as is to be expected of an advanced society that is a member of the world's finest organizations. This does not mean that we should copy the lead of the older members but that we should learn from those who have made wiser decisions. Having reached adulthood, we must preserve her ability to learn, own up to our mistakes and correct them.

Second, we have grown used to thinking about how to stay away from the "bad." In future, we should be more concerned with how to make good ideas a reality. We can no longer resort to the excuse that the Soviets and the half century of occupation were the root of all of today's ills, nor can we say that if we don't do something a certain way, something else bad is bound happen. A person who operates in a constant climate of fear, whether a teenager or adult, will eventually weary, lose their perspective and, eventually, their will. We need a baseline level of stability so that we deal with fields that have thus far received short shrift in terms of money, time or skills.

**Seeing Estonia as an opportunity, not as a forced duty**

Such a mode of calm and carefully considered action should not be confused with stagnation, which some claim has arrived, pointing to the number of presidential candidates or parties in parliament, or citing election results. In fact, never in our recent past have we had such an open, meaningful and at times intense debate over Estonia's future, democracy, civic participation, the substance and means of politics as we have in the last few years, within and between nearly all of the major parties. The nature and topics of the spring election campaign was significantly different – in a good way – from the circus of funding promises that we experienced just four years ago. This is a test of vitality of democracy, and it shows that we have grown up.

Our only goal in the new decade of freedom can be improving life in Estonia. Improving the quality of life covers a number of different goals toward which we should be moving:

- even in times of crisis, the state must remain functional, and it must always be in touch with the people, an active citizenry that senses their freedoms and responsibilities;
- government must encourage civic initiative and the free exchange of ideas and supports it when necessary, because a free country is always at the service of citizens and does not view the people as a state "resource";
- honest, corruption-free administration at the state and local level, and an economy which puts a premium on free enterprise and fair competition and which evolves out of an educational system that draws on everyone's needs and abilities;
- an open and friendly mindset toward both Estonians and non-Estonians and a foreign policy that integrates our interests and values in the best way possible;
- a European mindset that preserves and develops our own way of life, language and culture while having an appreciation for other ways, language and cultures.

Only in this manner will we attain an Estonia where living is something to be envied and not an obligation inherited from our parents. As I said in my last Independence Day Speech: Estonia's drawing power cannot be coercion, fear or obligation. Estonia's appeal must lie somewhere else. to be the kind of country where we ourselves want to live.

Currently there are a good many people who no longer want this, or who do not yet want it, or who find it difficult. There is no reason to chastise them for this. As a living environment, Estonia has not always been able to offer a safe or promising home to everyone. People have left, some with heavy heart, others less reluctantly. In the past few years, some have left for further destinations and longer periods. A free country does not forcibly prevent anyone from leaving;

that is the whole point of freedom. Still, we will have to find a solution in this decade as to how to motivate people to stay and to bring people back home. Everyone who loves Estonia is a unique and talented soul and belongs here.

Thus I see the primary duty of the new president as making sure that all of the children born in Estonia grow up to be full-fledged members of society; that young Estonians want Estonia to be the place to raise their families and do their work, to ensure that values and culture are borne ceaselessly into the future; that people can age gracefully and with dignity in Estonia; that the bonds of society are so strong that no one is left out. We must help those who feel superfluous or uncomfortable here, whether due to their ethnic background, mother tongue or history, to start loving Estonia.

It isn't just, or even mostly about money; it's not about keeping someone in place with money or buying them back. It's about fostering a sense of security. We must have confidence that there is a point to our building, dreaming, working hard to make the future better. This will allow us to have sufficient statehood experience that says: this is a state governed by the rule of law, no one will take away your house or my land here, and Estonia will not go bankrupt or spiral downward.

This self-confidence on the part of free citizens must be expressed ever more consistently in the form of transparent decision-making at the state and local level as well as in effective consumer protection that will make quasi-cartel pricing policies unthinkable, just as price gouging and outright deception of consumers are unacceptable.

## **Crisis preparedness**

The maturity and depth of a society's reserves can be seen by how well it handles emergencies and crises, how it recovers from them and whether society is capable of getting on in normal

fashion after such a situation occurs. Let's think for a moment: how capable is Estonia of responding if the water level in Pärnu were to rise three metres in a few hours? If a troubled individual opens fire at a ceremony honouring the best upper secondary school graduates? If something serious should happen at a nuclear power plant on the other side of the border?

We don't even have to think in an apocalyptic direction. At times the snow-choked or flooded streets of our capital are more reminiscent of a Siberian village than a European capital (of culture).

A company owned by the Estonian state invests in the deserts of the Middle East and the US Great Basin, but the storms that strike us with seeming clockwork precision in August and January leave tens of thousands without power, because investing in buried cable instead of overhead lines is said to be prohibitively expensive.

For various reasons, our road construction proceeds at a snail's pace every year. In the time it takes for a 35-kilometre-long tunnel to be hewn through granite in Switzerland, we manage to complete a 10 –km stretch of road over a landscape that is as flat as a pancake.

When all of the rescue helicopters are out of service at the same time in the drier part of the summer, that shows that things are not as well-planned as they could be -- not that more helicopters should be purchased.

Close to three years ago, at a public servants forum, I noted that the administrative structure that keeps the state running needs systematic review and maintenance. This is due to the reason, and no other, to ensure that all taxpayers have equal access to quality public services. Now we have been free again for 20 years and perhaps it is time to revisit our decisions, taken under different circumstances, with a fresh eye.

Our aim has been and continues to be to ensure that Estonia is a industrious, Nordic country where people's lives, life's work, native language, culture, freedom and work are honoured under an unwritten compact as well as under the fundamental liberties and freedoms afforded by the Constitution. Among other things, this requires honesty and peace in politics, not vacillating, and not by forever taking down walls instead of mending fences, or sowing discord and conflict in places where they do not exist and should not grow.

## **Role of the president**

One Nordic characteristic is the parliamentary system of government and consensus-based democracy. The President does not yearn for the aura of a revolutionary leader, but is the symbol of unity and establishes balance. Balanced governance means that abuses and miscarriages of power are not accepted, and that absolute power is not allowed to fall into anyone's hands.

The Riigikogu, president, cabinet and courts, and all of the elected people's deputies and public servants must fulfil their role with full responsibility, impeccably, without expanding their powers unconstitutionally. The president's role in our parliamentary democracy is to transcend political parties, to articulate the common values, goals and solidarity for all of Estonia, to be an advocate for civic society, to prevent constitutional crises, emphasize the importance of security and national defence, promote and protect Estonia in relations with other countries, and to effectively influence Estonian and world leaders in times of crisis.

The president must grow Estonia's spirit and ethos, making it greater and increasing Estonia's prestige in the world as well as in the hearts of its people, all of the free, enterprising citizens of the free country. This is an invisible yet clearly perceived network, such as a symbiotic mycorrhizal network at the foot of the great trees in an Estonian forest: The stronger and tighter the network, the better Estonia is poised to succeed as a country and the greater the well-being of all who considers Estonia their home. This work is worth doing. The effort is worth it. I continue to be ready for this task, in the office of President or in any other way.