

Address of the President of the Republic on the 25th anniversary of the Congress of Estonia 14 March 2015, Estonia Concert Hall

Dear friends,

Ladies and gentlemen, especially those of you who were here in this very room 25 years ago,

I too was allowed by a foreign power to come to Estonia at that time and be here in this room alongside you. My good friend Juhan Kristjan Talve, on the other hand, was not allowed to return to his homeland.

The movement of citizens' committees and the Congress of Estonia set the country a clear goal and launched it on a fixed course 25 years ago – to be a steadfast part of a free and democratic world, and to respect human rights and lawfulness. We are still maintaining that course, and it has guaranteed us lasting and successful development.

In electing the Congress of Estonia our people sent out a very clear signal for the restoration of independence.

This drove all Estonian-minded forces to set as their target the restoration of our own state, with the objective being nothing less than complete independence on the basis of legal continuity. There could be no third republic.

Following the elections for the Congress of Estonia, partial solutions were no longer possible. Debate on the union pact and on somehow loosely remaining a part of the state that had occupied us had been quashed and ruled out once and for all. No – because Estonia belonging to the Soviet Union was unlawful, achieved and upheld using violence, while leaving it was right and just.

The Congress of Estonia flew the flag of courage.

Our courage to make the right choices, then and since, has brought Estonia success as a nation and as a state. The country's security is ensured today more than it has ever been. In addition to our determination and willingness to defend what is ours, we also have the world's best allies. Estonia in 2015 does not have to fear as those who instigated and formed the Congress of Estonia did in March 1990, when thousands upon thousands of Soviet soldiers were still in the country and its borders continued to be controlled by KGB forces.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Congress of Estonia set a course for the restoration of Estonian independence on the basis of legal continuity, as a state whose birth certificate was to be the 'Manifest for all of the peoples of Estonia'.

This underlying concept of the congress is one to which we should be adhering today, bearing in mind very clearly that the state of Estonia that existed prior to its occupations was one in which the rights of all peoples were honoured.

Those championing the Congress of Estonia confirmed even before the elections that there was no place in the country for hate or intolerance. The chance to contribute to the shaping of Estonia's future was also extended to those who were not Estonian citizens by birth. They too were able to make their choice in support of national independence. As such, the congress opened the door to the future to everyone who wanted to be citizens of a free and democratic state of Estonia.

It is for this reason that I am embarrassed here in Estonia in this day and age to read views that extol totalitarian regimes and to hear disparaging remarks about other peoples and their sufferings, or simply about people who are different. I don't know whether the cause is stupidity or a lack of education, or quite the opposite, targeted political point-scoring. Most probably both. But I do know that all it leads to is enmity and suffering. How else would we hear justifications for hate speech that in fact there is no one-and-only truth?

Freedom and truth are connected and cannot be separated.

People understood this, right here in this room 25 years ago, when it finally became possible to say that liberty could not be based on a lie. They understood that a strong and independent Estonia could only be democratic and tolerant, including being respectful of different people and different opinions. It was on this basis that we restored our independence and joined unions of democratic countries – and it is solely on this basis that we will go forward.

The restoration of the Estonian state was a combined effort on the part of the heritage protection movement, the Estonian National Independence Party, the People's Front, the Supreme Council and many other unions and movements. But ultimately everybody had to decide for themselves whether they had the courage to stand up for their country. We should bear that in mind, and not start dividing ourselves up into right and wrong. Those who restored the Estonian state showed that our strength lies in openness and respect; anger and contempt would render us impotent as a society.

Let us maintain the core concept of the independence manifest for all of the peoples who live in Estonia.

Before I finish, I would also call on everyone to think about today – Mother Tongue Day. We should be proud that Estonian, the language of our free country and open society, is one of the official languages of the European Union. It shows how strong Estonian is, and it shows how strong the Estonian state is. But more than anything, it shows how strong the Estonian people are.

My thanks to you all – especially those of you who pioneered this remarkable movement. I thank you with all of my heart.