

At yesterday's commemorative lecture dedicated to General Johan Laidoner at Viimsi Manor, President Toomas Hendrik Ilves spoke about the significant and contradictory role of the one-time commander as well as today's national defense problems.

The Head of State quoted General Laidoner's order of the day number 1308 issued on March 28, 1920, when he was leaving office.

"If the consensus that has united us during the War of Independence endures between our people and armed forces; if we remain true to our democratic principles; if the mutual trust among the Government, people and armed forces endures, we can calmly face any external threats."

These words express the understanding of a democratically minded officer of a state and a society based on mutual trust and cooperation, President Ilves said, adding, "This is a concept of a officer that every president and every minister, every serious politician can admire."

According to the Head of State, it must be honestly admitted that General Laidoner was one of those under whose leadership Estonia abandoned parliamentary democracy in the middle of the 1930's and went along with the authoritarianism so typical of the times.

"He believed that this was best for Estonia. The leaders of that time erred in this question. Reclusiveness and the Silent Age deprived the state of the opportunity to conduct a smart and far-sighted policy," President Ilves said, "And when the Silent Age state lost its independence, then the Republic of Estonia, as the general himself, ended up in prison."

Speaking about the present, the Head of State affirmed his conviction that all of Estonia's serious political parties have done their best for the successful development of the national defense and now only a few self-thinkers demur in respect to the seriousness and efficiency of the Defense Forces.

President Ilves acknowledged Estonia's Defense Forces that have served in dangerous missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, adding, "The duty of governmental leaders is to take care of these men and women. I sincerely hope that the Riigikogu will soon pass a package of legal amendments that will improve the sense of social security for the members of the military who have been wounded on missions. This is the least that we can do for the members of our Defense Forces."

The Head of State conceded that the Defense Forces are currently having trouble with recruitment, which is inevitable in some respects, because rapid economic development creates temptations and military salaries cannot compete with the opportunities provided by the private sector, but he stressed.

"All the more why legislators and the organizers of the Defense Forces must make the effort where we can. Our obligation is to guarantee that Defense Forces patriots do not leave the service due to insecurity regarding the own futures and those of their families."

According to the Head of State, he is surprised by the fact that there are people in Estonia that question the capabilities and commitment of NATO, that there are those who set off NATO's fundamental principle of collective defense against the needs of Estonia's independent initial defense capability.

"Due to its historical experience and geopolitical location, Estonia should be the last country to call the contractual relations and seriousness of NATO's commitment into question," President Ilves said, quoting General Laidoner's words from the Maa Hääl of July 3, 1939.

"We have an excellent relationship with all our large and small neighbors, and we can say that we do not fear aggression, or attack, but we also know that [if] our position of neutrality demands, we will stand up with arms in hand if anyone wants to affect our independence, attack our country, or threaten our sovereignty in any way."

The right words, but the reality was much different, as we know with the benefit of 70 years of hindsight, the Estonian Head of State stated.

“Today, we can counter the illusion of neutrality with a place at the table of the world’s most powerful military organization. There are no cases in history where a NATO state that has found itself in a critical or simply uncomfortable situation did not receive the necessary help from its allies,” President Ilves stressed.

The Head of State also recalled the opinions of some members of the military that politicians sold out Estonia at the time, and therefore, the Defense Forces must not be subordinated to politicians, the Government, or the Minister of Defense.

“I am sure that the great majority of the members of the Defense Forces understand the role and importance of civil control in a democratic state. I am also convinced that the great majority of politicians understand their responsibility and obligations to the Defense Forces,” President Ilves said.

“Secondly, President Pääts certainly believed that he was making the best possible decision given the bad options. He did not sell out Estonia. He can be criticized for abandoning the democratic system of government. This in turn created the precondition for being silently broken and surrendering without a fight,” the Head of State continued, “And thirdly, in 1939 Pääts did not make his decisions alone. Among the others at his side was General Laidoner. This is not a reproach but rather confirmation that setting politicians, officials and the military off against each other is senseless, dangerous, and harmful.”

In summary, President Ilves again recalled General Laidoner’s order of the day number 1308, by saying,

“Transferred to the present day, one could summarize by saying— if the democratic form of government endures, statehood also endures. If trust exists between the people, the government, and the military, and we trust our allies and fulfill our allied obligations, we can calmly face any external threats.”