

Speech by President Ilves at the reception of the Day of the Restoration of Independence of the Republic of Estonia. Dear friends, ladies and gentlemen.

Welcome again at Kadriorg, all of you whose creative effort and spiritual resolve helped our nation to break free from the chains of alien power exactly 18 years ago today.

Today, let us recollect together those August days filled with hope and expectations, but also anxiety, fear and suspense, when historic decisions were taken on Toompea, when alien tanks were rolling on Estonians roads, when the Tallinn TV tower was surrounded by Soviet paratroopers.

Let us also consider together where we stand today. And most importantly – let us discuss in which direction we would like to proceed, and where to arrive. This day is quietly, almost inconspicuously denoting the beginning of a new era in the story of Estonia's life. Quietly, because this is just a beginning, and yet a beginning that is gaining more significance day by day, year after year.

Today, after a forced break of 70 years, the first Estonian citizens who have lived their whole life in an independent country, are reaching adulthood.

The previous generation privileged in this way was deceived by history. Their future was undone by the war, occupations or exile.

Therefore, we have so far mostly turned to the past when seeking to justify our failures. We say that Estonia was for half a century oppressed by the occupying powers, communists, the KGB, and that these things of the past obstruct our independent progress today.

This excuse is no longer valid for those who are 18 today, or younger. They know no other country than the one we have built.

The values and convictions they know are our own, not imposed on us by some all-powerful political party.

And their share in our society is growing. In about a dozen years, they will be a majority in Estonia.

Let us, therefore, look around in this very context and evaluate the current economic crisis, and the relativity and weakness of our values.

Let us admit that seeking to answer the hackneyed question – is this the Estonia we wanted? – we seem to be looking into the future, and yet all we can see are the diminishing and blurring features of the past in a back view mirror.

A citizen who has never experienced foreign occupation looks straight ahead and asks – in the present tense, which in Estonian also encompasses the future: is this the Estonia we want?

Young people are not comparing Estonia with ideals from the past or the Soviet atrocities. They compare their Estonia to other countries similar to us, and their own values here and now.

Dear friends.

The first 13 years of the independence we had restored took Estonia – via several intermediate stages – to the goals that we had set ourselves. We became free again, the Russian troops were made to leave our country, and Estonia joined the European Union.

Within the limits of time and possibility, Estonian strived towards maximum goals. In general terms, we were successful.

I am not saying that for Estonia, being project-oriented is the only way to reach major goals.

Still, we should always have a goal, an end, an answer to the question of what kind of Estonia we want – that would urge us on to new endeavours.

Our transition to Euro is a necessary goal, but in itself merely a milestone on the road to another end. Let us therefore ask ourselves: what other end?

Not the vain, temporal and worldly election promises mostly prompted by yearning for quick political profit and not long-term political vision.

Let us therefore ask: where is the fast resolve we once had – to become somebody or something? Where is our shared desire to move on?

When the present looks dark and there are no goals set for the future, we often resort to the past to fortify our faith in our continuity.

At such times, we pointedly start to recollect the crucial moments of our history from 90, 70, or 20 years ago.

As if an eager, ambitious youth had overnight turned into a pensioner, taking maudlin pleasure in the picture album with remembrances of his younger days.

Naturally, the pictures in the album are fine and dearly loved. They radiate fervour and youthful glow, and – most importantly – the sense of a future ahead.

Likewise, the Estonian picture album contains records of our War of Independence, the histories of the birth of our country and our national colours, the restoration of our public authorities, as well as the events that led to the loss and the recovery of our freedom.

This album has a celebrated place on the bookshelf of our nation.

Yet let us ask straight out – what are the latest issues on the bookshelf beside the old picture album?

Are there any accounts on what we wish Estonia to look like, for instance, in the years 2018 and 2030?

What can we see in the picture of Estonia today? Are we proud of that picture? I repeat: there is nothing wrong with recollections of the past as such. Also today, right here, we are celebrating an event that took place at the onset of the last decade of the 20th century.

Nevertheless, we have no right to translate the greatness of more or less recent past into the bravery of the present day. That greatness was attained by others, our predecessors, and not us.

Neither can we permit those whose time-horizon is limited with the next elections make claims on the clear-sightedness of our forefathers.

We have an obligation and responsibility to those who are reaching adulthood today. Today, at the onset of a new epoch in Estonia's life story, we must turn ourselves to face the future.

Only then can we answer the essential questions facing our country and our nation.

These are: our economic structure, and the cost-benefit policy of the state, which are in desperate need of restructuring;

the constantly growing unemployment, the dwindling livelihood of many citizens, people losing their homes;

the intention to distract our eyes from these problems and to resort to draconic measures of strong leadership.

This is no longer the time to cross our fingers tightly and hope that perhaps very soon things will improve.

What if they don't? It is not beyond possibility that many of our fellow citizens will be facing a winter of similar uncertainty and bewilderment as the first winter of restored independence 18 years ago.

It is true that, on material level, things have improved. Unfortunately, the hope and expectations we once shared have been replaced by anxiety, fatigue and weariness.

To solve the current problems, to set and reach new goals, is only possible if we learn to listen carefully to the opinions of others.

We will learn to set new goals only by looking carefully at our youngest fellow citizens, who are offering us novel solutions even today.

Let us observe the way they do it. With a faith in the future, because all the best is still waiting ahead. On their own, without the support of the institutional apparatus.

An apparatus is unable to create new values. Brilliant ideas are borne to the world by people,

and by associations of the like-minded. It is the obligation and the opportunity of the state to offer its support, and not to suppress such initiatives.

Dear creative artists.

One reason why democracies governed by the rule of law have done better than all kinds of alternatives is that in a democracy, intellect has authority.

Yet intellect has power and authority only when it also offers ideas and visions, and does not limit itself to commenting on the ways of the powers that be.

Intellect also has authority when, with the force of logic and reason, it takes the side of the citizen in defence of the citizen's fundamental rights. Just as it did, a couple of months ago, concerning the so-called Bronze Night acts. There is no need to fear being a voice in the wilderness. It may appear that there is quite a crowd out there in the wilderness, including the President of the Republic.

In the end, the authority of the intellect always manifests itself in the will of the citizens.

Wisdom, reason and humanity can only triumph if the citizens see that they have a choice, and that there are choices to be made.

It is in independent cultural space, where speech and thought are free, that these choices are born, take shape, become flesh.

Eighteen years ago, our nation restored its freedom, because our citizens were able to desire freedom. There are so many countries and nations where this desire is weak, for whatever reason.

Now, we must be able to hold on to that ability, not to lose it, but to guard and nurture it.

To stand up for ourselves, our fellows and our country.

To put the future into words, instead of standing by or looking on.

I wish us the strength to take all these steps, and a happy Day of the Restoration of Estonia's Independence.

Eighteen summers ago, in those turbulent days that were crucial to Estonia's fate, thousands of our fellow citizens rushed to defend the opportunity of recovering our freedom. More or less with their bare hands, they were prepared to face the combat machinery of the enemy.

Among them were the four men whom we even today regard as the symbol of our civic courage. Two of them showed both to the people and to their colleagues how to remain true to the oath of the Estonian policeman.

In those days of unease, their inventiveness and courage ensured that the inhabitants of Estonia were provided with information, that information from Estonia reached the wide world, and information from the world was available in Estonia.

These four men ensured that the broadcasting centre in the Tallinn TV tower, surrounded by the paratroopers from Pskov, could continue to operate and broadcast truthful information about the events in Estonia.

I am extremely pleased to call here Peeter Milli, Jaanus Kokk, Uno Kaseväli, and Jüri Joost. It is to these men, known to the people as the defenders of the TV tower, that the President's annual Independence Restoration acknowledgement stone is dedicated this year.

Thank you, you brave men.

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