

"Now, after more than 20 years since Estonia regained its independence, we are smarter enough to know that independence and freedom alone are not enough. An independent country must endeavour to strive forward and determine its future for the well being of its people, the maintaining of its freedom, and for its people and culture to prevail. I think that Estonia has coped rather well with this task," told the President, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, in Washington, at the 60th anniversary gala of Estonian-American National Council in the US.

"By the beginning of the 1950s, even the greatest optimists had probably accepted the tough fact that the Estonians who had fled from the Red Army in 1944 would be unable to make it back home anytime soon. That the freedom taken from Estonia would not return all by itself and in the foreseeable future. That this has to be won back. This was the reality back then," admitted President Ilves.

President Ilves thanked, on behalf of the Republic of Estonia, all these who continued to fight for a free Estonia, in a situation that seemed hopeless, without sparing their time, connections, knowledge and money. "In a democratic society, like the USA, this meant, above all, communication with the White House and Congress as well as with elected representatives," told President Ilves.

"The Estonian-American National Council, Inc. is now sixty years old. Many thanks to everyone who has helped the National Council reach this milestone. Special respect and gratitude belongs to all of those people who took the trouble to establish this organisation back in 1952," added the Estonian Head of State.

President Ilves emphasised that one of the functions of the National Council involves keeping the Estonian language alive, particularly among young people. "The most efficient method is to participate in the summer language camp, which Estonia organises for Estonians living abroad," commented President Ilves.

The Estonian American National Council (EANC) in the United States is a non-profit organisation and has the mission to help preserve and promote Estonian cultural heritage in the United States. This year, the EANC celebrates its 60th anniversary; apart from President Ilves and his spouse, more than 200 guests, including diplomats, members of the National Council, Estonians living in America and their friends were invited to the gala that took place on 29

September in Washington. For additional information about the Estonian American National Council, see the website at <http://www.estosite.org/>

The gala took place at Willard InterContinental Hotel in downtown Washington DC, in the immediate vicinity of the White House.

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