

The President, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, participated in Sweden yesterday in the Estival Estonian cultural festival and addressed approximately 700 people at the official Estival dinner.

The Head of State recalled that Stockholm and Sweden have very personal meaning for him and his family: "In 1944, my parents escaped from occupied Estonia, from on-going occupation, and came here to the western shores of the Baltic Sea. Sweden helped them obtain a good education and graduate from university. Sweden was for them – and thirty thousand of their co-countrymen – a gateway to freedom."

President Ilves was born and lived just over three years in the Stockholm suburb of Vällingby; from there, his family moved on to America.

"Gratitude towards the Swedes and the state of Sweden has been with me all my life," he confirmed, "as once upon a time, a small section of a nation, deprived of their homes and homeland, stood on these shores in total uncertainty, still cherishing hope, and this is where the Swedes reached out to the refugees and gave them a new roof above their heads and a place to call home."

President Ilves also emphasised that the active and visible political activities of the Estonian community took place in Sweden in subsequent decades, helping to maintain the Republic of Estonia.

"And one incredibly important thing and one that we should never forget – Sweden was among the few during the first half of the 1990s that consistently and passionately demanded – during the Government of Carl Bildt and at his initiative, in the western world in general – the quick and unconditional withdrawal of the occupying army from Estonia," said President Ilves.

When speaking about Estonian language and culture, he said that the Estonian language today holds an official status higher than ever before, adding: "Our people learn, work and realise themselves in all parts of the world and often find the time to be the ambassadors of the Republic of Estonia, Estonian people and culture. We should see this as our strength and our opportunity."

President Ilves cited one of the organisers of the Estival formal dinner, Kristian Luuk, a son of boat refugees, who told about his values when discussing being Estonian to Eesti Päevaleht in Stockholm and recalled his parents who began their lives on a new page: "This has also influenced me – how to make the right choices, obtain a good education and adopt smart decisions. I am convinced that the mentality of ambitiousness has made me successful – it is important not to be just good, but to be the best."

This is what we need – the ambitious desire to be the best, said President Ilves.

"Of course, Estonian language and culture need to be both nurtured and protected," he said. "But we don't have to keep it unchanged – which would mean conservation, closing and putting a stop to development. This is not possible. Estonian culture and language must maintain their roots and identity while moving along with the rest of the world."

The things we see happening with Estonian culture do not refer to closing or perishing; this is confirmed by the contemporary Estonian cultural festival, Estival, which has taken place for the past 30 years in Stockholm, President Ilves confirmed, saying: "Thank you all for keeping the Estonian language alive and the Estonian mentality strong here."

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