

Honourable members of the XII Riigikogu,
Prime Minister and members of the Government,
Ladies and gentlemen, friends,

We are living in tumultuous and complicated times. I have repeatedly affirmed that Estonia's security is more robustly ensured than ever before. We received confirmation of this less than a week ago, when President Barack Obama stated, right here in Tallinn, clearly and directly, that Tallinn, Vilnius and Rīga are just as protected as Berlin, Paris and London. We have made the right decisions in our time, from instituting the withdrawal of Russian troops from our soil twenty years ago to meeting the terms of our agreements within NATO. And now we can see that there was good reason for us to do so.

The world around us, and the part of the world right on our doorstep, has changed. What we hoped would never be repeated has happened again. War is raging in Ukraine. It was started by a country whose border stands just a few hundred kilometres from Tallinn. Its mask has slipped.

We see Russia isolating itself ever further from democratic countries. At first it merely supported the armed separatists; now it has attacked its neighbour using its own military forces. The Russian security services have seized an Estonian citizen on this side of the border, removed him to Moscow and imprisoned him there, obstructing the Estonian consul from making any contact. Russia's military action has led to the imposition of sanctions by democratic countries. Estonia will do everything within its power – and within the power of its allies – to ensure the swift and safe return of our countryman.

But everything that is happening on our doorstep should remind us that security and well-being cannot be taken for granted. We have to make an effort to guarantee both. And there is every reason to make that effort: the decisions we once made in favour of democracy, the rule of law and membership of the European Union and NATO represent the best protection we currently have. May our wisdom and strength prevail so that we continue to make the right decisions.

Honourable members of the Riigikogu,

Four years ago, when opening your first session, I set out Estonia's goals for the next twenty years. As I saw them, in any case.

To my mind there is only one path we can follow to ensure that our culture and that we as Estonians endure and grow.

We have to create the kind of Estonia that Estonians want to live in and which their friends want to visit. That is within our power.

Since we are a small country, change is something that can be swiftly effected. Good ideas emerge here and truly great things can be made of them much more easily than in larger countries.

Our goal should be to make Estonia the best place to live in the world. Estonia should be a country where intelligence and generosity predominate; where everyone has the opportunity to make something of themselves and to enrich their lives emotionally and materially; where we trust and value every person; and where everyone does what they can to ensure the well-being of themselves, their family and society.

There is no room in such a country for satisfaction gained from mocking and denigrating others. Estonia must be a tolerant and liberal country in which there is respect for basic rights and the equality of all before the law.

For this reason I am pleased that the draft act guaranteeing the rights of same-sex couples is finally before you. The tone and style of this debate reflect the current state of political culture in Estonia. In discussing this issue we stand at something of a crossroads: in choosing where we go from here we decide which people and which nations we want and are qualified to align ourselves with; whose values we subscribe to, and want to subscribe to.

Estonia must grow a little bigger every year. Emotionally. In terms of the influence it wields. In terms of the well-being it offers. Does driving a wedge between people and sowing seeds of distrust and animosity help us achieve such growth? It does not.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is no place in a democratic country either for the granting of special status to the members of its parliament. Rights must be extended to them that ensure their ability to perform their duties without hindrance. They must have the independence required to effectively superintend the activities of the government. But that is all.

In Estonia, everyone is equal before the law. If it is suspected that a crime has been committed, it must be possible to gather evidence – regardless of the suspect. Abuse of power, including unlawfully spying on another person, is prohibited in any event.

It is for this reason that for every restriction of basic rights there must be an effective control mechanism. In my view, what we should be doing here is reinforcing our controls. For example, the Chancellor of Justice could be far more involved in assessing the legality of detective work and the gathering of information. I hope you make some progress in this area before the next parliamentary elections.

Honourable members of the Riigikogu,

With those elections next March already looming into view, we ought to look back and reflect on whether the Riigikogu has made Estonia a bigger and better place through its decisions and its actions since the last elections. I would hope that the electorate does the same.

It would be premature to start issuing report card-like grades at this point. To my mind the Riigikogu in its current incarnation has done a great deal, and done it well. Take, for example, the enacting in law of the submission of collective memoranda and public initiatives that grew out of a proposal made in the People's Assembly, giving ordinary citizens the opportunity to contribute to the legislative drafting process first-hand. I hope this right is taken up with enthusiasm and in good faith.

Because Estonia will only become a better place if we all – and by all I truly mean all – contribute what we can to ensuring that it does. Without taking against anyone or anything, but standing for the best possible decisions. Knowingly and sincerely.

Today, with the battle for spheres of influence once again raging in Europe, where the divide between democratic countries and autocratic states that fly in the face of the law continues to grow, it is particularly important that we all do our utmost to defend human rights and the freedoms we have fought so hard for. To not slide into glorifying authoritarianism, which we have sadly already seen in the political proclamations of a number of Member States of the European Union.

I implore all parties: be constructive in your criticism. Present programmes that are clear and achievable. Let us use the time leading up to the elections to compare future scenarios and to debate their plusses and minuses.

The majority of developed countries around the world are faced with the same problem: the future can no longer be built on economic and population growth. Jobs that require little or no training are disappearing at an ever-increasing rate. At the same time, people's expectations in terms of welfare are by no means diminishing. Countries are competing for educated and productive people. More than ever, young people, and some older people too, are emigrating in the name of work, education and self-realisation. Neither borders nor language barriers are obstacles to them. This is the reality: denying it will not help us move forward.

As such, we should ask ourselves what Estonia can do in order to be successful in this global competition. How can we establish a living environment that keeps local people living here and attracts smart and skilled people from outside to contribute to its well-being?

How can we reach the highest possible level in the hierarchy of value creation? What can we do to guarantee that invention, design and profit all happen right here? How can we encourage people to come here who are capable of boosting our social wealth?

What can we do to ensure that public administration is rational, flexible and responsive? How can we rid ourselves of ersatz action that wastes both time and money and gets in the way of decision-making?

Should we really be allocating tax revenue and state resources to life support for clinically dead units in the hope that one day they will simply die of their own accord? That is a question that pertains to many areas of life, from schools to local authorities. Putting off making painful but unavoidable decisions is bad for the country.

I am not calling on you to make rash decisions merely for the sake of doing something, with justifications like "It'll sort itself out!" or "Perhaps things will get better!". In many cases, decisions whose impact is unclear are often not only harmful, but in contravention of the constitution.

The questions to which voters await answers in the coming election campaign are many.

I would hope that those who take part in the campaign in spring have the integrity to eschew two very cheap tactics: promises of money where there is none; and belittling Estonia. Focus instead on choosing an honest path to the future.

Let me emphasise: with the mandate of the electorate you can and must make big decisions. Because as I remarked last winter, what brought us here will carry us no further.

In the short term, decision-makers can come in for harsh criticism. People are not pleased when reforms fail to be implemented, but even the most minor act of reorganisation can see the government hanged, drawn and quartered. That is no different here than it is anywhere else. It is easy to take against the status quo as one voice; it is much harder, but much wiser, to agree and to decide where to go next, and how to get there.

There are times when you can and must maintain a certain stability. And there are times when your old approach simply no longer applies. You have to shoulder the responsibility, make the decision and act accordingly. You have to reconcile yourself to set-backs and console yourself with the fact that a fair assessment is only arrived at when the results of reforms are there for all to see.

Now, once more, is the time for great statesmen and -women.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have already touched upon national security in its broader sense. International cooperation, keeping a finger on the pulse of developments in Ukraine, continuing to wield as much influence as we can in the European Union and NATO and maintaining a sufficient level of defence spending and a smart defensive plan are steps the state can take. Its citizens can and must contribute to the country's defence within the limits of their abilities and the options available to them.

But in addition to this, everybody can defend Estonia in their hearts and minds. That is something it will be easier for us to do if the best possible example is set for us all right here in Toompea Castle, in Stenbock House and in each of our ministries. Thank you.