

The President of the Republic on the 97th Anniversary of Estonian Independence 24 February 2015

Good people here in this hall, at home and far from home.

I am speaking to you at a moment that is special in many ways. Every year in the journey of the Republic of Estonia, which has lasted for 97 years, is unique and the road has been sufficiently long, winding and momentous to deserve reflection.

Yet, at the same time, we as citizens are now making a choice for the next shorter period, the election period. Many of you have already made your choice, for the rest this undertaking still awaits you. In five days, the votes will be counted and it will be clear who we want to see leading Estonia into the future.

Good Estonian citizens, this is your choice, your decision, and many of us, including me, see this as everyone's obligation and as a demonstration of our concern for our country.

It is because of the elections that our gaze is filled with tomorrow's hopes rather than reflections of the past. And this is why I am consciously avoiding any partisan references or recommendations. The mature citizens of a grown-up country do not require such guidance. We have sufficient experience with free elections to separate the statesmen from the gamblers, the doers from those who only make promises. I only hope that your decisions are not based on negations, because this is not a good basis for making any decisions.

Good friends.

But where does Estonia stand in anno domini 2015? If we examine the state of the economy and the statistics, then we are more or less where Finland found itself less than two decades

ago. In other "life rankings", we are more likely to find Estonia nearer to the top than the bottom. Where we reasonably and totally naturally believe that we belong.

However the poor position, for instance, in the rankings related to the wage gap or alcohol consumption should make us sad. Especially since no improvement seems to be in sight.

But I do not want to talk about vodka or money, but about peace, freedom, education and truth.

Exactly a year ago, events started to unravel about a thousand kilometres south of us. Today the entire post-Cold War security structure of Europe has been destroyed. Is there any other possible interpretation of the occupation and annexation of Crimea?

If we examine these matters from the Estonian viewpoint, without using foreign policy terminology, we can say that the former inner sense of security has been disrupted. Questions are being asked in our newspapers and in our homes that we have not heard since the restoration of our independence.

A war is underway in Ukraine. People are being killed there every day. Even now. This is a new type of war, in which one clearly proven combatant is openly using the newest weapons while denying everything.

One the main characters in this war is Untruth. For almost an entire year, Europe also kept saying that, despite all the proof, "separatists" were involved. In other words, recalling George Orwell's timeless perception, peace is again war and a ceasefire actually murderous artillery fire.

To date, the democratic world has limited itself to sanctions and supported Ukraine morally, politically and economically. I hope that this moral backbone remains strong. We need to feel secure that Europe's current consensus will continue. Because, Europe may not want war, but the war in Ukraine is a reality regardless of what we want.

If Europe can learn anything at all from the past, it is that concessions only cause the aggressor's appetite for new demands to increase.

The Chamberlains of the world bring messages of peace, but not peace itself.

Who should be more familiar with these cold currents than Estonia? Among other things we know that Estonia and the other Baltic states are not the next "Ukraine", although some people think it trendy to say so. Luckily, they are wrong, just as they were wrong only a few years ago, when we were admonished for our supposedly baseless phobias.

Estonia is protected. As we saw in today's parade, the NATO allies are in Estonia. The security of Estonia and NATO is integrated – with its presence in Estonia, NATO is defending itself. Europe and the NATO allies have a greater consensus regarding security questions than ever before in the last quarter century. The deployment of allied forces to the border countries of the alliance is an answer to the new reality. Estonia has a battle-ready Defence Force and a militia with a strong will to defend – the Defence League.

A few days ago, I heard a Ukrainian parliamentarian say he thought that Estonia had just been lucky. That we became free and immediately got into NATO.

But our achievements to date have not simply fallen into our lap. We did not have a pre-determined road to Arcadia marked with blinking lights. In the garden of forking paths, we had the wisdom to choose the one that has brought us here.

Because we are painfully aware that Estonia is our last refuge.

Nothing is pre-determined. Getting into NATO and the European Union, like the withdrawal of the Russian military forces from Estonia, was the result of the single-minded efforts of many people. We are eating the fruits of these efforts today, and every day we are growing more – together.

Ladies and gentlemen.

The fate, nature and future of every nation is determined by the values on which the society and state is based. Estonia's founding principles are written into our Constitution. Already in 1918, when independence was declared, the democratic nature of our state, everyone's fundamental freedoms were established, many of which were not adopted by other states until later. These same principles were reconfirmed by a national referendum when our freedom was restored.

The fundamental rights guaranteed by our Constitution establish the foundation which makes Estonia dear to so many of us, which makes Estonia your republic, the republic of us all.

Its foundation is still secure almost a quarter of a century later. This despite the fact that life has vastly changed. That the under-30s can obviously not remember the Soviet occupation. That life at that time was eight times poorer than in Finland. That we needed visas to travel. That there was no Internet. That trolls were only a means of transportation and not Internet troublemakers. And NATO and the European Union were goals, but mainly still dreams.

When I said one year ago that the things has brought us this far will not take us any further, this was the core of my thought. Every generation must explicate the foundations of its nation to suit the present day.

When maintaining our democracy, we must constantly assess what works and what needs to be improved. Estonia must not repeat the errors of others, we should learn from them. The idea of independence is to be oneself, not to become someone else.

What are the ideas that have perhaps become dogmas for us, that require refreshing? What ideas have exhausted themselves? What perceptions of the state's structure, which seems to be the only alternative in the whirlwind of restoring our freedom a generation ago, have become a hindrance or even a problem today?

On the one hand, we are very forward-looking and proud of things like Skype, the abundant start-up companies, many of which have achieved great success in the world.

But at the same time we are very conservative in other areas and attached to dogmas that were valid 20 years ago.

This is a paradox and I formulated the assignment to resolve it a year ago. The answer will be provided by the people.

Good friends.

The increasing demands that we place on our state must not result in the expectation that the state knows and does everything. Ask yourself: does Estonian society really have to be organised to such a great extent by instructions and prohibitions from the state?

Let's ask ourselves: how does the increasing role of the state as a babysitter or even parent corresponds to the idea of our Constitution? The Estonian state is founded on freedom. I repeat, first of all on freedom, on truth and on justice.

Seeing laws that function normally being rewritten time and again, with the addition of ever more rules and regulations, and ever broader supervisory obligations for the police and officials, inevitably, the following question pops into the mind of many people: Has a situation really developed where every person living in Estonia has to be treated as a probable criminal or half-wit, just in case?

It seems to me that our fervor to achieve order has caused us to exaggerate. I much prefer a state that trusts its citizens and the civil society.

After all, most people are responsible, they are capable of anticipating the consequences of their action and want to receive praise not condemnation from their fellow human beings.

Therefore, I hope that the Riigikogu that is currently being elected and the next government will be able to resist the temptation of overregulation. Let's preserve our Constitution and its spirit. Let's preserve our laws. Let's do exactly what is needed and leave what is not needed undone.

Ladies and gentlemen.

Education is the religion of the Estonians. We truly believe that the best thing that parents can bequest to their children is a good education. Not land, houses, forests or bank accounts.

The most important capital today is knowledge and skills. Therefore, the quality of the education everywhere in Estonia must be uniformly excellent, in order to give all our young people the opportunity to strive and become the best in their fields. Schools must not be inadequate anywhere, because of the learners or location of the school, the authority or poor administration of the local government.

Actually, education is an issue related to the life of the state, and not to local life. At least, starting with basic school. Estonia, with its 1.3 million residents, has the obligation to ensure a uniformly high level of teaching everywhere and for everyone. The small size of the local government or its lack of funds or the convenience of the decision-makers cannot be an excuse.

The Estonian school system must be able to keep pace with a changing world and changing times. Because children, students, do not know any other time or any other world. We live in revolutionary times. Analysts say that when the children who are starting school today in the developed countries start looking for jobs, 40% of today's jobs will have disappeared or changed. So let's ask, are our schools teaching tomorrow's skills to a sufficient degree?

Placing greater value on the work of teachers when it comes to both salaries and prestige is still a key issue when it comes to the future of Estonia. If we do not do this we may soon discover that our success in the PISA tests has disappeared. If we cannot attract talented teachers, which can only happen if we pay proper salaries, we are bound to fail.

But, make no mistake, in the places where the school system functions well and the work of the

teachers is appreciated – for instance in Finland – much is also expected of the teachers.

Adopting this way of thinking can no longer be postponed. Experience shows that reorganisations in education bear fruit after 10 to 15 years. The actual changes occur when we start teaching students and not curricula. Education is a long-term process, longer than the terms of the next Riigikogu members.

Ladies and gentlemen!

I am speaking about education because this is part of what will take us forward. After all, the foundation already exists.

Here and now we must also acknowledge that despite all our dissatisfaction, we have truly achieved something great during our new period of independence. Something very great.

With our decisions, achieved dreams and work, each one of us has successfully developed Estonia.,

We have proven that Estonia deserves our care and love.

We can definitely state that we have learned. This time we have done it right.

Let's finally acknowledge that:  
The second time we have done better.

We have something to defend if necessary, to preserve and to cherish.

This is our truth and our justice. It is truth and actuality that we must honour and appreciate more. Truth. The rule of law is impossible without justice, but justice is also impossible without truth.

Some time ago, probably in 1988, the Virulane, the newspaper of the Viru collective farm, flew like the first swallow into the dawning sky of freedom from this very area, Virumaa. The newspaper had a blue-black-and white border, and its motto was Truth rises, lies sink.

Fortunately, truth did rise. But recently we are seeing that the advance of Untruth is underway. This undermines the foundations of democracy and freedom. We are faced with a situation where verifiable and empirical truths, as well as actual facts are successfully being questioned.

We are told that such a thing as Truth does not exist. That everything is relative and all versions of the truth are equal. Here a tragic example from last spring, when different versions of the crash of Malaysia flight MH17 started to be presented to the public. The causes of the crash included:

- A) a Russian rocket
  - B) Ukrainian fighter plane
  - C) the passengers were already dead and the plane was flown into Ukrainian airspace to explode;
- Or UFOs did it.

It is asserted that all of these are equal "truths" and we are asked, "Who are we to decide which of them is most truthful?"

The Enlightenment period started after the triumph of the natural sciences, which is still underway, disrupted the concept of absolute godly truth.

After this authority, which was based only on Aristotle and biblical dogmas, was overturned, an understanding developed that people themselves discover the truth. It is not handed down from

somewhere above, truth can – and as much as possible -- must be proven.

Based thereon, the understanding grew that non-elected kings and emperors do not have the godly right to rule. As an alternative, the idea arose that it is the people that have this right. And this is reflected in our Constitution:

Estonia is an independent and sovereign democratic republic wherein the supreme power of state is vested in the people.

Or more simply put, our modern democratic principles grew out of the triumph of truth over blind faith.

The contemporary approach has expanded the concept of Truth. And asserts that there are many truths, and none of them is better than any other. An intellectually interesting and very Western idea, but if harnessed to the wagon of an authoritarian ideology it can become dangerous, especially when supported by power. If we do not aspire to Truth, we will discover that we are back in the Middle Ages, where the truth is forcibly delivered from above. Then Power possesses Truth. And this is what we are seeing in Ukraine today.

Fine. There can be many truths and often there are. But a shield against conscious lies must be maintained. Just like Karl Popper once said, "We cannot prove the truth, but we can prove what is untrue".

Therefore it is extremely important for the media to stop searching for the truth and to rely on the facts. At this point, I would like to praise the Estonian press. The TV viewers, Internet followers and newspaper readers have probably noticed that the Riigikogu candidates are under much greater fire and only making promises will not take them far. The professional reporting on the election campaign makes our democracy stronger, it develops Estonia as a society and a state.

This brings me back to the beginning of the speech:

The elections provide the Riigikogu and the government with direction. As people, we make

decisions every day that give our lives direction. We can decide ourselves and we do. But only as long as we utilise this right, which an independent democratic Estonia has provided us.

Dear Estonians,

Your vote is the state. Your vote is an order to those who are elected. Vote!

Who you vote for is a question related to your worldview and conscience. Vote!

Your vote is the democratic state.

Today, exactly 50 years ago on 24 February 1965, the great Estonian author Karl Ristikivi wrote the following lines in his diary:

The anniversary of the Republic. I have barely had time to think about it. What's it to me – was it my republic? It only became mine after it ceased to exist.

Half a century later, many people in their homes, sitting around a table, or alone think this way: is it my republic?

My answer is: It is your republic and my republic. Everyone's Republic of Estonia!

If this is true, we do not have to curse ourselves or fate,

Then Estonia truly is our republic,

And then it will endure.

Long live,  
Long live Estonia!