

Good friends!

Before I start speaking on this beautiful day about where we are today, 24 years after the restoration of Estonian independence, I cannot ignore an unpleasant event that is related to today's day of celebration.

It is the reason why we are wearing yellow ribbons today: to demonstrate our hope and decisiveness that the Estonian citizen kidnapped from the territory of the Republic of Estonia a year ago will be brought home again.

As we know, police officer Eston Kohver was fulfilling a work assignment on the Estonian-Russian border control line. His assignment was to stop smuggling across the border. The best description of the situation and characterization of Eston Kohver has been provided by Estonian Ambassador Jüri Luik:

"He is true hero. When a person goes to work in the morning, says goodbye to his family and 24 hours later appears in Lefortovo Prison in Moscow, and despite this, preserves his resolve and sense of humor, /--/, then this person is made of sturdy stuff."

Ladies and gentlemen, at that same time, we are enjoying our freedom here in the Rose Garden, in Roosna-Allika, Roosta and everywhere in Estonia, a man, who has served our country, who was kidnapped from Estonian territory while carrying out a work assignment, is sitting in prison in Russia.

He was sentenced to a strict regime prison camp a day before the Estonian people's day of celebration. This coincidence is hardly accidental.

He is sitting in prison because he did his job well. Because, things have gone well for Estonia. For some people and countries too well.

Let's not forget him.

Let's provide support to Eston's wife and four small children, to everyone close to him.

It is thanks to Eston and others like him, who loyally serve the Estonian state and people right to the end, that we are free and will remain free.

Dear listeners,

During the last nine years, I have spoken a lot about the importance and necessity of civil organizations in democracy. In the meanwhile we have seen how people's initiatives are starting to play an ever greater role in the organization of Estonian life. We now even have a word for it – vabakond.

Much has changed compared to a decade ago. And exactly as I hoped – the initiators and leaders of this change have been the people themselves. Not the state. The state has gone along with it. Maybe with less than sufficient fervor, but let's admit that the attitude of the government and state toward civil organizations has changed irrevocably.

And this is the nature of civil society – of the initiatives of people who are acting freely. Whether we are talking about the urban neighborhood or village societies throughout Estonia, the global phenomenon of Let's Do It, the Carolin Illenzeer Foundation created to support the children of members of the Defense Forces that have been wounded and killed, or the creation of community schools.

Civil society is stronger today than every before in the history of our nation, but it is nothing new in the lives of Estonians. In 1870, 145 years ago, Jaan Adamson and Hans Wühner, two schoolteachers in Viljandimaa, started a collection. The purpose was to provide rural children a proper education in their mother tongue.

As we know, the tsarist authorities forced their own will on the people. But it was a start.

I recently read an obituary for my great-grandfather, in which his work on behalf of the Alexander School was mentioned prominently.

Last week we celebrated the start of the 110th season of the Estonia Theatre in this same rose garden, a theatre that was also established as a public initiative, and the roots of which also reach back to the Estonia Society founded 150 years ago. Or the St. John or Kaarli Church, which were born of the free will and hard work of our forbears.

At that time, the Alexander School Committee and the Estonia Society were founded primarily to promote the culture and education of our people, not yet our own state. Even before Gustav Suits wrote that we stand between two states, one is darkness and the other light the Estonian people well understood this.

We chose light and acted.

Dear listeners,

Similarly we cannot ignore another civil initiative – the Letter of 40 – that occurred 35 years ago and which I believe culminated on August 20th 1991.

This civil initiative, which was very daring for the time and sprung from the conscience of the signatories, is also a monument to the Estonian creative community's active defense of our culture, language and nation.

We tend to forget the importance of this initiative against the background of our daily bread and criticism. In a totalitarian society, at a time when people were sent as prisoners of conscience to

Perm camp no. 36, forty well-known and respected representatives of the cultural community wrote a letter criticizing the authorities. They did so publicly, signing their own names, not anonymously as is done some commentaries, which did not exist at that time.

Although the authorities did everything in their power to suppress it, the initiative sent an encouraging message to the entire nation. It set the example for future civil undertakings: for the Phosphorite War and publication of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, for the night song festivals and, in a more organized form, for the Popular Front and Estonian Committee movements. Those who organized and ran our Constitutional Assembly, its leading thinkers, for example, Jüri Adams, came from these same civil organizations to establish the foundations for our re-independent state.

The authors of the Letter of 40 were not imprisoned, but they were persecuted. Their family members and colleagues were also harassed. Today, we know that this persecution did not come as a surprise to them.

And with such valor, and maybe without even realized it, they created the basis for those processes that, about ten years later, gave us the courage to take back our country.

Thinking of this, let's ask ourselves today: where and who are we, how daring, how enterprising? I am asking so that later – right here today – we could discuss. Amongst ourselves. And speak about important things.

Because, as Sten Tamkivi noted some time ago: "Our language of communication has become confused." And if this has been noticed by one of Estonia's real world thinkers, then it must also been definitely perceived by creative people. The open society discourse is moving toward the gutter, if we allow ourselves to use this term.

The language that a few years ago we encountered only in anonymous commentaries has now arrived in the mouths of politicians and sentences of writers. If only a few years ago, a word competition, which got its start in this rose garden on August 20th, resulted in such a beautiful word like vabakond, then today, other kinds of words are being introduced into our language, which I would not deign to say as an example. But we have probably all read or heard them. If we slip into vulgarities the result will be detachment and irrationality, hatred and hostility.

Let's not start scoffing about "political correctness". No. Insulting and mocking other people, especially by politicians, does not violate political correctness. Simply said, it is just boorishness. With language resembling the unmuffled roar of a motorcycle, we are being told that the Estonian language and culture is "in danger."

I don't understand. Since 1940, the Estonian language and culture has never been as strong as it is today. Let's recall the provisions of the Letter of 40, in which the Estonia intellectuals found that the uncertainty of the Estonians regarding their future is caused by the following:

- the circumscription of the use of the Estonian language in business, everyday matters, science, and elsewhere. This is a trend that is characterized by the compulsory presentation of theses about Estonian language and literature in Russian, and by the exclusive use of Russian at the festive gathering marking the fortieth anniversary of the Estonian SSR;
- the growing scarcity of Estonian-language journals and many books, especially material related to the indigenous culture and and the inhibition of research in the field of national sciences.

Are we really experiencing this long-forgotten fear today? Or are we reviving it in order to appeal to the darker side of our souls?

Estonia's convergence with European normality during the last 24 years and the increase in of Estonia's security has resulted from the fact that Estonia is free. And like I said, we are free because people with a sense of mission raised the topic of the survival of our language and culture 35 years ago. But independence brings new responsibilities -- ones we could not even dream about 35 years ago.

Being part of Europe does not mean waiting for others to help us. We must also make a contribution ourselves. Not wait for the government to do something. If we want to prevent the rise of exclusive truths and authoritarianism, which was protested against 35 years ago, then civil society and the cultural elite must act.

Instead of a destructive and passive longing for the past, we should be arguing about how to carry Estonia forward. And, in this connection, avoid alternative activities. Including those that focus on prohibiting certain items of clothing.

Lively and civilized discussions will carry Estonia forward. Which, by the way, means that in a free democracy, the evil bursting forth from the peripheries of the freedom of opinion also has its place. And this is normal.

This is normal as long as we remain true to our ideals and fundamental values. As long as the majority rushes to defend a healthy democratic society, if necessary. As long as we call boorishness and hate exactly what they are.

This means that every citizen and creative person has the courage to declare their opinion; without fear that it will cause a backlash from organized evil. And not wait and hope that the government will do something.

Friends,

The hopelessness that made forty intellectuals risk the worst on behalf of their nation 35 years ago has dissipated a long time ago.

Now we are in the driver's seat. All of us. We can and we must take care that our hingekodu here in Estonia is unblemished. Let's take the wheel ourselves; sit proudly in the driver's seat, because despairing in the stern is a wretched alternative, which is intolerable for all of us.

I thank you. I thank the entire Estonian nation on our national Independence Restoration Day. And as usual, I am giving a piece of a boulder from the Toompea barricade, a symbol of the reclamation of our freedom, to the people whose merits I have already recalled today. To the signatories of the Letter of 40. Thank you. Long live Estonia!

Andres Tarand, one of the initiators of the Letter of 40: please come up to accept this rock.