

Hello, Estonia.

Today we mark a significant event: we have been free again for a quarter of a century. Free as a people and as a state.

When we look back at the Estonian people's past, we see a prevailing undercurrent in the promotion of our self-awareness and culture.

This is the concept of "we too".

That "we too" are equal subjects as a people, that our language and culture should have a place under the sun.

Or – like Kristjan Jaak Peterson asked two centuries ago:

Does not the language of this land
in the wind of song or
rising to the sky have a right
to search for an eternity for itself?

This idea of "we too" carried us toward freedom.

The Estonian flag was born more than 130 years ago, when Estonian university students who were forbidden to organize academically said that we too deserve what students of another nationality have. Thus we got our own colors, and blue-black-and-white were chosen.

The battle for education and journalism in our mother tongue, our own opera, theatre, city government, and finally, a hundred years ago, our own state, is neatly summarized in our independence manifesto:

"Start building your home, where order and justice rule in order to be a worthy member of the family of cultured peoples! "

Even as we declared the independence of our own state we wanted that "we too" would become a cultured people. Although at that time, almost a century ago, the creators of our state did not have to worry about culture any more.

And then, decades later, as an occupied people, the people of culture were again among the first to raise the torch.

The creative people took the lead in regaining our state and our freedom.

To mark this event we have been gathering here in the Rose Garden since 2007. I truly hope that this event, which was almost forgotten, will continue to be celebrated in this garden in the future. That we will all feel joy about everything that the freedom regained in August of 1991 has given the Estonian people.

Ladies and gentlemen.

I know that in recent times it seems strange or even awkward to say that things have gone well. It is popular to criticize, blame and disparage. OK. Just in passing – and not at all diffidently – I stress that a recently issued international analysis says that, compared to the other countries that shaken off Communism, Estonia's democratic development has been the best.

If we look at Estonia's freedom indicators – freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of the internet, level of corruption – we are better than most European states.

Repeating this list is even a bit tedious for me. But despite the critical sense that is inherent in our people, but also acts a driving force, we should acknowledge that this is not praise for the governments, presidents or more broadly politicians.

You have done all this.

The people have not only elected the parliaments, but also created a strong civil society. You have done this yourself, deciding yourself how we have used the freedom that we achieved 25 years ago.

We have proven once again that a free Estonian people can achieve miracles.

No, dear listeners, Estonia is not a paradise on earth, or the country with the best living environment in the world. Not yet. Freedom has brought us good fortune and success. But if we think that everything is fine, we would be deceiving ourselves.

We have lots of worries and unsolved problems.

The Estonian population is declining and becoming older; outlying regions of the country are becoming marginalized.

We tend to splinter and encapsulate as a people.

Too many among us cannot cope.

These threats must be recognized. An effort must be made to resolve and assuage them. With

good sense and heartfelt concern and by exploiting these threats for political gain. We can solve these problems together, and not by confronting each other.

It is insecurity that feeds intimidation and arrogance. And the only weapon against this is honesty and straight talk. With values and basic truths that keep these clear beliefs alive:

that freedom of speech provides the opportunity to express one's opinions without fear, not to insult, mock or revile;

that elementary civility is not political correctness;

that vulgarity is not a human right;

that by protecting family values, we protect people, not hate them;

that a lie is not the truth, but always just a lie.

For me, dear listeners, these choices are clear. And I have based my entire life, including in my work as the President of the Republic, on these choices. I see no room for compromise here. And do not see any going forward. Not personally or institutionally.

Ladies and gentlemen.

In nine days at the earliest, Estonia will get a new president. The current campaign shows that many have still not understood what the president's job is. Because, why else would someone ask a presidential candidate: "Who should ensure high-quality Olympics broadcasts?"

This reminds me of a radio commentary after the presidential elections many years ago: "Good. Now pensions will finally start to increase!"

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In totalitarian states the presidents raises the pensions. And makes sure high-quality TV broadcasting from the discus competition. And all the more – the president even makes sure that one's compatriots win medals at the Olympics.

Let's not fool ourselves. These are not the assignments of a president in a parliamentary state.

In a globalizing and integrated world, the Estonian head of state must see our state in the context of great processes, and find a way to formulate our state's assignments and explain them to the people.

The president's most important constitutional assignment is to defend our independence and national security, and if necessary, to be a lightning rod to ground tensions, to risk becoming an unwelcome messenger, and sometimes to be silent. When words cannot improve a situation.

These are not only foreign and security policy decisions. Independence, as we well know from our history, can disappear due to self-created isolation. When, as a young man, I started to understand why I did not live in my parents' homeland, I understood that isolation, being cut off from the rest of the democratic world, is absolutely the worst thing that a small nation that Estonia can allow. That if Estonia should become independent again, we must never again choose isolation.

The president serves his state and people, and does not merely seek public popularity. He does not give into the temptation to scold politicians at every opportunity. This would be easy, but cheap.

The office of head of state, unlike that of presidential candidate, gives a person responsibility and experience.

A president's scolding of a prime minister, government or political parties should always be reasoned, not be just self-promotion.

Good friends.

Finally, something personal.

Having been deeply rational, often skeptical, critical and self-critical my entire life – and maybe even more self-critical that a head of state can show in office – I have always questioned everything that is irrational or emotional.

But sometimes we just need to believe.

I remember how in the early 80s I was driving down a highway in Canada and heard some stunningly beautiful music on the car radio. I stopped the car. I was hypnotized. I listened to the end of the piece. Then I heard the announcer say that *Fratres* by the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt had been playing.

Even earlier, when reading Estonian literature, I understood how a daring spirit can accomplish something great.

The same was confirmed to me by the letter of 40 intellectuals, the Hirvepark demonstrations, the plenum of the creative unions, where the courage to stand up for freedom showed what can be accomplished when you believe.

I felt that same thing when I watched the films of the Nocturnal Song Festivals, sent to me in Munich by courier.

What happened 25 years ago was a culmination of this free spirit.

And what followed – how the belief in Estonia's own currency – the Estonian kroon – defied advice to the contrary.

How Estonia carried out reform after reform, which others avoided or later copied.

The same belief enabled us to propose something that was later called the Tiger's Leap.

The same belief gave us the courage to strive for the impossible and try to get Estonia into the European Union as quickly as possible.

We have been inspired by the four young men that created Skype.

And the Let's Do It! civil initiative, which is now organized in more than a hundred countries around the world. And in recent years, the dozens and dozens of innovative Estonian companies and civil initiatives.

This has all confirmed my belief that when free, Estonians can accomplish great things, if they only dare and are allowed to do so.

The Estonian people must focus on acting and achieving.

Our national novel is Truth and Justice, not Envy and Malice. We no longer have to dream of "we too".

We are

the masters of our own state, our own freedom.

Masters, as we know, takes care of what they have, what they have created. They do not let unsolved problems pile up. They think about the whole picture and the future, because they see the present and what exists as a legacy for their descendents.

Masters focus on the significant and not the extraneous. They do not waste time or energy on envy or malice, but spend it on self-improvement.

Because they are free. Like we are.

Estonia is free. Let's continue to be daring.

Long live Estonia.