

Dear compatriots!

Ärma, where I am sitting during the last minutes of the ending year, is like a small narrative of Estonian history. This homestead in Mulgimaa was bought free and clear as a result of the hard work of my 19th century ancestors.

From Mulgimaa, children were sent to be educated in the city. Here, before the Second World War, they rejoiced over the fruit of their labor. This was a place of despair: the arrival of foreign troops, book-burning, flight into the woods, and mass-deportations. Much of this land – and also Ärma – was left empty. However, faith in the future and better times endured. When these times arrived 15 years ago, the lands here were cleared of brush, and homesteads began to be restored.

We need faith. Faith in our homes, our work, our families, our people, and our country. And we need to be proud of it.

We are proud of ourselves, but many of us are not proud of our country. We like the Estonian people and culture, but our country does not evince the same sentiment.

This is unfortunate, because it undermines us from within. We must believe in our country and be proud of our country. If we do not believe in Estonia, we do not believe in ourselves. If we are not proud of our country, we are not proud of ourselves.

Let us not adopt such a stance toward ourselves, for you are worthy of praise and recognition.

Moreover, it is your authority that the March Riigikogu election will place in your hands, the

people. Accept this power to improve your country. You have the liberty to vote. Transform this liberty into an obligation to determine which political parties see beyond today or tomorrow's one-off deal and are prepared to sign a contract with you for the next four years.

Things are going well for Estonia. Things will go even better for Estonia; we have become wealthier than ever before. The closing year made us richer with the birth of almost 15,000 children. This is more than in the preceding twelve years. There are more marriages in Estonia and fewer divorces. Although all this will not arrest the decline in our population, it still shows our belief in the future, that we are more at ease more self-confident and optimistic.

This year, we rejoiced in the splendid victories of our athletes. We felt ourselves united as a larger and prouder family. This is an ineffably good feeling. We would like these wonderful moments to repeat themselves again and again. With the help of our joint aspirations and efforts, our cheering and jostling, they will.

From the warmth of our hearths, we support the members of the Estonian Defence Forces, who will welcome the New Year many time zones away in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Balkans. You are performing difficult and – as the news of recent days has harshly confirmed – dangerous work on behalf of your country. I thank you and your families, who steadfastly support you on the home front.

When Estonia regained its independence 15 years ago, we were impatient. We did, however, persevere so Estonia could become a country that was not isolated and alone in a remote corner, but among trusted partners. And Estonia has become the country we wished it to be – a member of the European Union and NATO.

Today we also see impatience around us. It is different, however. One senses increasingly a spiritual constraint. Young people, people who have just graduated from school and hope to find breathing space and European openness abroad, often complain "Estonia is too confining." We must convince them otherwise. We must demonstrate that Estonia offers both a sense of security and openness.

For this we need understanding, tolerance and, in particular, caring. This is something that each of us, both individually and as a society, should do. Care. For instance, what is it but ordinary

caring not to get behind the wheel of a car drunk or tired, thereby not endangering your own life or those of your fellow citizens.

The most moving experience of these long holidays came from the Estonian people when you, during the Christmas Tunnel TV program on Christmas Day, donated over three million kroons for the purchase of resuscitation equipment for the Children's Hospital. Thank you!

I think the state should now find the wherewithal to add at least another three million to the common till created by the people during the holidays.

I know that not all of you who are now watching and listening to me are sitting around a bounteous holiday table. Therefore, I hope that the caring spirit of Christmas will not end with the holidays. Keep on noticing those who need help, help them, and teach them to help themselves.

We need to love Estonia more. Just as our forefathers a century or two ago, when they founded their homes, in the course of war secured their long-desired freedom, and became masters of their country, loved Estonia.

Our dreams and wishes, for both the coming year and years following, shall come true. For this, I wish us all strength, charity, good health and faith in the future.

Happy New Year, dear Estonia!