

Dear Mr. Rector,
Dear academic family,
Ladies and gentlemen.

Tomorrow is the birthday of the Republic of Estonia. In speeches given in the honour of an anniversary, it is almost always discussed how well the birthday boy or girl has done so far, and what he or she might accomplish in the future. We congratulate the object of the celebration and promise him or her our support.

The Estonian state has already lasted longer than demographic forecasts predict to an average Estonian. At the same time, Estonia is still young enough to make critical choices, and experienced enough to learn from the past.

One thing is clear – Estonia needs care and support from all of us, every day. Our recognition too, and admonishment if necessary. The Estonian state is to be built by us, and only us.

The well-wishers and warners are numerous. Their good wishes and warnings tend to vary. They often contradict each other. Arouse confusion and arguments.

Yet, dear friends, silence at a feast would be far worse. It would be terrifying, if we had nothing to say, because there was no longer any point in saying anything, or no desire to do so. Or if we were not allowed to. This would mean that it is too late to form an opinion, and that for us, the time of advices and assistance is irretrievably past.

Therefore, let us be glad that there are opinions about Estonia. Now we have to think of a way to voice these opinions better, so that the voice of our fellow citizens would have an impact on those whose task it is to guide and lead our country in the best possible way.

I am convinced that hundreds and thousands of our fellow citizens have both the will and the skills to speak their mind about Estonia's future. This is not a privilege limited to politicians or opinion leaders, for whom it is often part of their work, or even their duty, to proffer visions.

The beauty as well as the solutions are often in small things, not in all-encompassing generalisations. The Estonia that belongs to us all is born on the grassroots level, not in the Government meeting hall or in the Kadriorg palace. Estonia is to be built up by our citizens, our fellow countrymen.

Therefore, it is a great honour for me to address you from the venerable Tallinn University on the occasion of the birthday of the Republic of Estonia, and to announce the essay contest titled: "What Kind of Estonia Do I Want to Live In?".

Estonia has restored her statehood and assumed her place in the family of democratic western countries. Yet Estonia is still not quite what we would like her to be. Instead of complaining – is this the Estonia we wanted? – we should speak about what we want Estonia to be like.

It is time to give voice to our thoughts about what Estonia should be. Let us, then, discuss together what is good in Estonia today, and what worries us. What lessons can we learn from our past? What can we learn from other countries' experience? How do we get all the people living here to consider Estonia as their home?

What could I do to make Estonia a good place to live, where the birth of a child is a welcome event, where young people are not leaving to work abroad, and where the elderly can enjoy a peaceful old age? Let us look into the future and think of ways to go forward. What could Estonia be like in 10, 50, 100 years?

Those are obviously questions that many of us have posed, they trouble us, we rack our brains for answers. It would be good to know the answers, so that we can choose the best way forward, all together.

The idea of this essay contest comes from Professor Margit Sutrop, Head of the Ethics Centre of the University of Tartu. We have discussed this idea in the President of the Republic's Academic Advisory Board, and the members of the Academic Advisory Board have agreed to act as members of the jury. Also the President's Office and the magazine Akadeemia have promised their support.

Already at the beginning of next week, the terms of the contest will be available on the homepage of the Office of the President of the Republic. Today, I'll just tell you that the contest is open to all. We expect your contributions to arrive by St. George's Day, and the jury will make up its mind by Midsummer.

I am convinced that there are many among you who will take part in this discussion. Let us therefore write a hearty and impelling birthday story for Estonia, our own country, the one and only.

But let us do that on Monday, because tomorrow we shall hoist the flags, sing our national anthem and celebrate. Happy birthday, dear Estonia!