

Dear Estonians.

The day of knowledge is a day for all of us. We are all educating ourselves constantly, using the skills and habit of learning from our school days.

It is at home we pick up the diligence, responsibility and resolution necessary for learning. It is at home we learn that learning is work.

I hope that those almost 13,000 children whom we celebrate today in Estonia, the children whose very first day at school it is today, will see school as their first place of work. I hope they will be met by bright-eyed teachers and child-friendly schoolhouses. I hope that, in co-operation between home and school, our children and grandchildren will get the best education, an education that ensures their well-being and happiness in life.

A couple of days ago we learned the regrettable fact that 1,500 children are not enlisted in any elementary school. Those boys and girls would fill a big schoolhouse. We have to find them. The Government – and local governments – have the duty to make every effort to diminish the number of young people who have been lost to education and thus also to a life of human dignity.

Dear fellow countrymen.

From today, students of secondary schools with the Russian language of instruction will have more classes in our national language – Estonian. In the tenth form, also Estonian literature is included in the curriculum.

Both the Government and school headmasters have confirmed that the Russian-language secondary schools are prepared for this change, and that the teachers are feeling hopeful. Also the students themselves – as well as their parents – have far more foresight than some politicians who seem to have been caught in the past. The motives of the opponents of this reform are unknown to me, but whatever they are, one thing they are opposing is young people's future.

I will repeat the message I gave to our young compatriots last autumn in Narva: the knowledge of any language, and any culture, is enriching. It does by no means obscure anyone's national identity. It deprives no one of anything. It is an opportunity which I advise all of you to take full advantage of.

And now let me turn to grown-ups.

It is customary, on 1 September, to emphasise the need for learning. Unfortunately, it seems to me that in many cases, it is the adults, and not the children, that should be sent to school. What is happening in our traffic is exceeding all limits of tolerance. An uncaring attitude towards self and others, speeding, driving drunk and with unfastened seat belts, are the source of increasing death rates on our roads and a cause of much suffering.

In the 16 years after the restoration of Estonia's independence, more than 4000 people have been killed in road accidents. This is almost the population of the city of Põltsamaa. Hundreds of children have lost one or both parents. An intolerably great number of children are receiving treatment for road accident traumas instead of going to school for new knowledge.

Dear fellow citizens, enough of this! Let us slow down. Let us consider our behaviour behind the wheel and towards our roadfellows. Let us, in this way, make our children's road to school less dangerous. I invite you all to behave as responsible citizens and fight traffic hooligans and potential murderers. Let this autumn be an example, an autumn when every child can safely get to school and home from school.

We improve our knowledge constantly, throughout our lives. No one is too old to learn. No one is too wise to learn or too foolish to make a fresh start.

I wish you all new learning and new wisdom!