

Dear ladies and gentlemen,  
Dear fellow citizens.

I wish to thank the Network of Estonian Non-Profit Organisations for the invitation to this conference. Thank you also for this opportunity to say a few words about civic society, and especially about good citizenship.

In my present office, I travel about Estonia quite a lot. And all over Estonia – in Setumaa and Hiiumaa, in Mulgimaa and Ida-Virumaa – I have seen civic initiative and cheerful enterprising spirit on the rise.

The Estonian state was born of civic organisations. Choirs, firemen's societies, and later also academic unions. It was in those circles that the idea of the equality and equal rights of the Estonian language and culture emerged and gained strength. Also the courageous idea of our own country, Estonians' home, was first born there.

At the outbreak of the War of Freedom, it was the volunteers who were the first to face the overpowering troops of the enemy. Reading memoirs, we can see that the majority of Estonians scarcely believed in our victory at first. Students, schoolchildren, teachers and former officers of the Russian army believed in it, and went to war.

Without such self-sacrifice and civic initiative the Republic of Estonia would never have been born. Speaking of good citizenship, this is an example we all should always keep in mind.

Today's civic organisations, equivalents of the choirs and societies of the past, are engaged in home decoration, as well as local and village history. More and more, we can see voluntary activities for a cleaner environment. Or to help those who cannot manage on their own.

Each of us can provide several good examples – Maarja Village, Neighbourhood Watch, extinguishing of forest fires, and tree-planting in spring 2004. It is here, and in many other enterprises that the deeper significance of being a citizen is revealed.

Soon, or to be more exact, on 3 May 2008, we shall have an all-Estonian campaign for cleaning our forests of garbage, on the initiative and involving the participation tens of thousands of good citizens.

What should be the role of the state in relation to the third sector? Above all, the state should be the citizens' understanding and unselfish partner and creator of a favourable environment.

The state and local governments need not support everyone, but there are those who need direct support, at least to begin with.

The state is not the wise leader of the civic society. No local government, no political party must engage the enterprising spirit of the citizens in its own interests. No one has the right to make

citizens' initiatives dependent on services rendered.

The state must not abuse the initiative and concern of its citizens. The Grandparents' Movement came to the streets of Tallinn this autumn to help young schoolchildren to negotiate the traffic, but this does not mean that from now on, it is solicitous grandparents who are in charge of traffic safety in Estonia.

Instead of looking for scapegoats and passing the buck to each other, the state authorities must make sure that they can start the cleaning of sea water and rescuing of damaged birds promptly and without prompting in the future. Although thousands of our generous fellow citizens donate millions of kroons to children's hospital every year, it is still the responsibility of the government to ensure that hospitals have the necessary equipment and technology.

Estonia's development, and the safety of people who live here, is our common concern. Here we can act hand in hand. Discussing and agreeing upon our roles, sharing our strength and mutual recognition.