

Dear graduating students and students,  
Dear teachers,  
Dear friends!

On the day after tomorrow, our country will be 90 years old. In all our minds – and especially in the minds of young people – Estonian state has become something commonplace and familiar. And that is good. That is what one's country should be – commonplace and familiar. And therefore close to us.

This is probably why we very seldom wonder what our life would be like if Estonia had never been born as a country. What would be different, would there be a difference? Many peoples in the world live without a country of their own, even bigger peoples than Estonians.

The fate of some of those peoples who found themselves living in the territory of the Soviet Union in the early 20th century permits us to assume, with considerable certainty, that without the Republic of Estonia, there would be no Estonians and no Estonian language, nor would our culture exist. It is sufficient to consider the fate of our kindred peoples, who never had the good fortune to live in a country of their own.

The people of Estonia as such exist owing to the wisdom and daring of their forefathers to proclaim our sovereign state 90 years ago, and to fight for it in the War of Freedom.

Let us keep in mind today that students of your age, your school-mates, were the ones to lay the foundations of our country when they went to war as volunteers. Where did it come from, this resolution, this self-denial, this renunciation of almost everything they knew? To risk one's life in a battle which, by a majority of their fellows at the time, was believed to be hopeless, hardly reasonable?

Yet perhaps their enthusiasm was the grain of sand that turned the scales of Estonia's destiny?

Let us keep in mind that a single generation had time to be born, grow up and be educated in the Republic of Estonia before World War II. For a long time, they remained Estonia's most fortunate generation.

Yet it was the same generation that was to bear the hardest losses later on. So much of that excellent education and breeding was never to be put to use, was simply wasted! In the war, in prison camps, in the life of refugees or under persecution. Many of them, both in Estonia and around the world, ended up with jobs that had nothing to do with their excellent education.

Still it was them, the survivors, who became the men and women I have called the carriers of the thread. These men and women brought the ideals and the yearning of the Republic of Estonia over the dark precipice of the occupation era. In the two decades preceding World War II, the Republic of Estonia had built a pillar of strength that would last half a century.

A few dozen thousand intellectuals – that was the foundation that provided the spiritual sustenance and the precepts of remaining human to the intermediate generations. The foundations on which the Estonian state was rebuilt 17 years ago.

You, dear students, are the next Estonian generation born, bred and educated in a free, democratic Estonia. This is why you, in your turn, are our most fortunate generation, the new pillar of strength to our nation, which will shape the face of our state and our nation in the next half-century.

It is entirely up to you what this face will be like. The thread has to be carried on. Not just over precipices, but also on straight roads and even landscape. So that the cord entwining the ideals of Estonian state, our joint attainment and the actions of each single citizen would grow in density and strength. If only we all might have the wisdom to prevent the blows that our predecessors had to suffer.

Yes, the youth of the early 20th century was also dissatisfied and demanding, often looking for faults rather than virtues in the accomplishments of their forebears; bent on making the world a better place. This is what young people should be like. This is what you are like.

A few weeks ago I heard from the Rector of Tartu University that a major part of last year's secondary school graduates continued their studies outside Estonia. Immediately, without making an attempt to apply to some university in Tartu or Tallinn. Needless to say, it was the better part of students rather than the reverse, as they were actually accepted to foreign universities.

Similar visions of the future may be ripening in your minds. I wonder whether this is a sign of the ever-opening world and Europe, of growing appetite for the very best, or discontent with what Estonia has to offer. Probably a mixture of all these.

And all this is right and proper. No one could expect you to settle for less of your own accord. No one can appeal to your inherent patriotism and persuade you to stay here. The freedom to choose, to make your own decisions, is the fundamental freedom that the Republic of Estonia has secured to you.

To us, those entrusted with the power of writing the laws and seeing to that they are followed, your choices indicate that something is awry, or still not good enough. Just as some other choices indicate that this country, this nation is the only place in the world where we can feel at home.

And this is why, in my opinion, those who say that Estonia is too small, and therefore not good enough, not in world class, are mistaken. The citizens of Luxembourg do not talk about Luxembourg being a small country. They talk about being the wealthiest. The citizens of Finland do not say they are small. They say they are the best in IT. We, too, can be defined by other values than smallness.

Let us, then, overcome our inferiority and envy. Let us appreciate and value the fact that our

nation has a home, our own country, where we can live in Estonian. Our own country – for several bigger peoples still just a dream. Let us travel, study and work abroad. In Europe, our spiritual home, where your parents returned at the time when you were born, and whose political future we too are shaping since four years back.

Go abroad and stay awhile. Look around. Learn the best that the world and Europe have to offer. And come back. To Estonia – a country which to you may seem narrow and confining, but whose very smallness still brings us together and keeps us together.

Let us together appreciate the way we all meet again and again. On the Song Festival Ground, or the Viljandi Folk Music Festival, or on the football arena. That we can share a mutual joy of recognition, quite indiscernible to others, of Marie Under, Jaan Kross, Andrus Kivirähk, Rudolf Tobias, Arvo Pärt, and The Bedwetters, Kaljo Kiisk and Rain Tolk.

Also, let us keep in mind that our forefathers' dream of our own country has come true – for us – and only us – to keep alive and make better.

Did not Juhan Liiv have this dream a little more than a hundred years ago:

It may take millennia –  
Before it's not painful to see,  
That along with big nations  
A small one may be free.

That love fills the small nation  
And happiness,  
Loving parents and children,  
Loving freedom, no less.

And so it is in Estonia  
And so goes fate:  
That once – what a sound idea –,  
There will be Estonian state.

This dream is only a hundred years old, and a reality since 90 years. Today more than ever.

And is this not a good reason for us all, and especially you, to dream of an even better Estonia that we have created and cultivated?! Estonia is the creation of you and me, of every one of us.