

Ladies and gentlemen,  
Dear friends,

Like other nations in Europe the Estonian nation has to take note of many, too many sad anniversaries in its history. Today we commemorate and remember the terror and violence committed in March 1949 against the Estonian nation when approximately 21,000 of our fellow countrymen were torn from their homes and sent off to Siberia.

Sixty years ago today it was mainly women, children and the elderly who fell victim of the violent occupation. This does not mean that illegal violence against grown-up men could somehow be more acceptable. As we know, the fate of men turned out to be even harder at times.

Unfortunately, I have to use the word "approximately" when it comes to the total number of the deported, because we still lack full information about the fate of all the victims of this crime against humanity. Many children and grandchildren do not know to this date what exactly happened to their parents and grandparents. Where they were taken, what was done to them, where they fell, and where their last resting place is.

This crime of deportation as everything that came before and after it – the violence of the Nazis and the Red Party – has left a deep wound in our very souls. Various sociological surveys carried out by Estonians and foreigners have come to the conclusion that various repressions directly concern nearly two-thirds of native Estonians. Their family members were killed, deported, imprisoned and sent to exile. This was done unfairly, arbitrarily and unjustly, disregarding any procedures characteristic of a rule of law.

Unfortunately, the past illegal violence has somehow remained impersonal and therefore somewhat implicit. Let us look at our use of language: we speak of events where we should be speaking of acts of terror; we say "it was committed," "were killed" and "were deported" as if these acts of terror had not been committed by people, as if the Soviet monster was some sort fear or death-bringing fog that "took place" or "was committed."

By emphasising that in the case of crimes we must speak of people's deliberate actions instead of an impersonal force of nature, I am not trying to bring the guilty to justice. Most of the criminals are dead, as are their victims. Even the youngest survivors of the March deportation are reaching retirement age.

I emphasise the issue of specific offenders only to ask how this could happen and if it has anything to do with the present day when we hear people from the East, West and even from among our midst wondering why we talk so much about our recent past.

In fact, I am asking the same thing that was asked about the Germans who, in spite of their contribution to the high culture of Europe and the world, were able to commit unspeakable atrocities in the first half of the 20th century. How was it possible? Or, when put in other words and brought closer to us, the same question would sound something like this: "How come the first president of Estonia following restoration of independence and a well-known March

deporter both come from the same Estonian family?"

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let us face the truth: the people of Estonia have not overcome their tragedies. As can be seen from *Tõrjutud mälestused* (Rejected Memories), a painful book written by Imbi Paju, many people do not want to remember the acts of cruelty that were done to them. This is their right.

But those who were not directly touched by the tragedy have no right to forget the past. The same goes for those who deny or justify the deportation today. The same goes for those outside Estonia who call upon us to forget the past. I ask them: "Who has given you the right to prescribe to victims of a crime how to deal with their tragedy?"

However, if others do not have the moral right to deny our painful past, we, Estonians and others who have lived here since ancient times, are obligated to come to terms with our tragedy. Only we ourselves have the task of healing the wounds in our souls' and getting over the injustice that was done to us in the past.

Indeed, we cannot understand this injustice that was done in the name of a pointless ideology. As any family or individual cannot understand why they became victims of a crime. But we have to record and preserve our historic memory. The simplest way is to write down these memories and send them to the Estonian Literary Museum. Considering the age of the deported, I call upon their younger relatives to talk to their grandmothers and grandfathers, and record their stories.

We have to do this work. We have to do this in order to avoid a national memory gap. We need this as evidence against those who deny or ridicule deportation. And against those who think that these painful and rejected memories paint too gloomy a picture of the occupation; who think that this shows their communist past in a bad light, raises unpleasant ethical issues or is bad for business with a neighbouring state of ours.

We should find out the fate of every single person who was imprisoned and deported. Without anger or prejudice we should also identify the ones who committed these crimes. Even if they are no longer alive. Only then may we finally grasp what made these people commit such crimes.

In fact, all those who deny, belittle or close their eyes and ears to what was done here are afraid. They are afraid of the truth. The truth makes their myths collapse and they would lose the basis for their self-justification. Let us think, why is it that every time we, Estonians, speak of deportation we are accused of fascism?

It is because the accusers are afraid of the truth like Nazis who actually knew what they were doing and desperately tried to destroy any evidence of their crimes. They are afraid of the truth like those who deny the Holocaust. The truth is the weapon of victims. The truth is our weapon. Let the outing and explaining of the truth be the victim's revenge on the criminals and our moral guarantee for the future.

Our future generations could then grow up with the knowledge that our past is open and it is clear that every crime or criminal is tracked down in a rule of law. The Estonian Institute of Historical Memory was recently founded to perform this work.

But besides identifying historic facts and names the possibility to remember and grieve over our victims can also help us overcome the trauma. We need a memorial for the repressed. We owe it to all those whose graves are unknown or far from their homeland. They are the casualties of the restoration of our independence.

We have to keep this in mind now and always. The price of our independence was our blood and the road to restoration of our independence demanded even more victims. That is why every one of us who can lead their life in free Estonia today is obligated to preserve the memory of those who lost their life for our freedom.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Estonian state was created 91 years ago so that the people of this country would have the right to live in a rule of law. Without the rule of law we stand no chance of surviving, because that would mean the rule of raw power, which depends not on justice, but numbers. This will inevitably lead to the very crimes whose victims we are commemorating and whose consequences we are explaining here today.

Perhaps here lies one of the reasons why I as the head of state and a citizen always emphasise the need to strictly follow our Constitution. Even if it is not popular. I consider it my duty to protect Estonian laws and the rule of law against the public rage of the people who have been provoked on populist grounds.

Our faith in the rule of law is not undermined merely by populism and misrepresentation of law. The viciousness and anger surrounding us, which perceived in public and anonymous statements and comments poses a similar threat to our protective barrier of freedom. Let us be honest, the tone of statements made in Estonia today is at times exactly the same as used on the darkest days of occupation.

When I read or hear such statements I catch myself thinking: "What if this evil found a way to express itself in actions? What would Estonia be like if all this aggressive vulgarity were reflected in actions?"

Do not misunderstand me or think that my call for more reasonable behaviour is an attempt at shutting off the necessary criticism or of establishing censorship. Instead, we should think about the fact that the general spread of viciousness leaves an individual more and more unprotected. And here we can ask, can we control ourselves as a nation and for how long, if we often cannot even control ourselves as individuals?

Dear friends,

I have spoken about the need to keep alive the memory of those who suffered and died. I am also convinced that our main defence against repetition of these atrocities is the rule of law. But what Estonia today needs even more than that is the strength of all those who suffered from the repressions. The deported have survived things that others cannot even perceive. Things that those who were born in independent Estonia cannot even imagine.

Therefore I call upon you to help bring Estonia back to reality. When newspapers, television programmes and politicians race to herald the doom of our economy and past success, we still need to place our current situation in some reasonable context. Yes, the times are difficult. We are all worried about the setbacks for the economy and everyone has to tighten their belt.

But the global economic recession is not the end of the world. Our country is not being raided by alien troops and we decide our future in free elections. We are back in Europe from where we were torn out nearly 70 years ago.

As victims of the 1949 March deportation you represent the very part of our living historical memory that does not let us forget where Estonia has been or let us forget what real hardship is like. In circumstances that were far more terrible than the present difficulties you survived owing to your strength and energy. We can also remember your tough past, by pulling ourselves together and collectively overcoming the present difficulties.

You are the best representation of and you affirm to all of us my declaration, which I addressed to the people of Estonia on Independence Day: to embrace the idea that we will make it.

Thank you!