

Mrs Helle Meri,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Friends.

We have gathered here today to open the Lennart Meri Conference, already a tradition, where, in the next two days we shall discuss key issues of foreign and security policy in Europe and the world.

Today, Lennart Meri, the spiritual patron of our conference, a great European and the first President of Estonia after the restoration of independence, would have celebrated his 80th birthday.

Allow me therefore, to touch briefly on the importance of President Meri on the Estonian political stage, where he played a leading role for nearly fifteen years. In those fifteen years Estonia became what it is today – a democracy governed by the rule of law, a member of the European Union and of NATO.

Yet let us imagine us back at the end of the tumultuous 1980s. What occurred then need not have gone the way it did, even if many today it all as self-evidently pre-ordained.

At the time, the independence in Estonia and the other Baltic States was in no way considered in the West as necessary. To the contrary, insofar as the Western powers until August 1991 considered perestroika the best thing they could imagine happening on this side of the Iron Curtain after World War II, the attempts of the Baltic countries to break free from the Soviet empire were seen as unnecessarily rocking the boat and that this could disrupt a long-desired idyll.

Without a credible, convincing, but first of all an erudite advocate, our quest for freedom would not have made itself heard, still less understood. I am not sure we would have been heard out.

Like Lech Walesa in Poland and Vaclav Havel in the Czech Republic, it was Lennart Meri who became the spokesman of the Baltic countries' aspiration for freedom. He could not be brushed off or dismissed, as he was wiser and cleverer than many of his interlocutors. He was in his element in the waters of international diplomacy, and made excellent use of his perfect knowledge of a number of foreign languages.

Lennart Meri provided a striking contrast to all the other so-called diplomats and foreign policy experts from ex-Soviet countries who wearied listeners by laboriously reading verbatim from badly written texts stories of the injustices done to their countries and the debt owed them by the West; an approach the West had long become accustomed to, meriting a shrug, but leading to no action, but rather, changing nothing.

Meri created a new reality. He showed Estonia and the Estonians, our resolve and our goals as different. If you will, as Western... And he did this so convincingly that many of us started in fact to feel Western, different, special, and – to be honest – even to feel superior.

An individual's role in history can be interpreted in different ways – should it be considered primary? Or should the role of the individual recede and be viewed rather in the framework of some general historical processes?

I would certainly dare to say that 15-20 years ago, Estonians were neither superior, nor more special, nor inferior to the other nations that shared our fate. We were taken seriously in the early '90s because our spokesperson was Lennart Meri.

Let us keep this in mind the next time we speak unfairly and condescendingly of nations that have not fared as well as Estonia. Perhaps the only reason for their lot has been just their hard luck. Their hard luck, at a crucial time, not to have a statesman who was at the same time persistent and unpredictable, taken seriously, yet playful.

Whence the paradox. Perhaps we are doing an injustice to the nations and peoples who are not always considered to be „Europeans like us”, for the very reason that they have had no spokesperson who would have matched ours? Not because they differ that greatly from us.

Estonia was lucky to have Lennart in the times that were crucial for us. But this good luck should be what enables us to understand those who lack a Lennart of their own.

We see the potential of those countries despite the absence of such spokespersons. We understand that if we give a country or a people a chance, if we give them the necessary benefit of the doubt, as we were once given – then it might just happen that they too will become our allies, fellow member states of the European Union.

I believe that if Lennart Meri were to wish something for the Europe today, it would be just this: that everyone who strives for freedom, for democracy, and for the rule of law should be extended a helping hand; they deserve to be trusted, they must be given their chance.

Thank you.