

90 years ago in the month of June, the commanders of the young, fighting Defence Forces of the Republic of Estonia Respected members of the Defence League, dear fellow countrymen.

90 years ago in the month of June, the commanders of the young, fighting Defence Forces of the Republic of Estonia adopted a series of risky and, in a good sense, adventurous decisions.

The Battle of Võnnu, which serves as a milestone for all the consolidated wins achieved in the War of Independence, was inevitable. It just had to happen, sooner or later, whether it was going to be in Võnnu or elsewhere.

This scene had been set by the armed forces of the German Army, the Landeswehr, which turned to oppose the freedom of Estonia and Latvia, in response to developments in Latvia at the time. No country wants instability across its borders. Both then and now, Estonia sought a peaceful and friendly neighbouring country.

The Battle of Võnnu proved, yet again, that military processes could develop faster than politics or diplomacy. Estonia had no choice. Back then, there was limited interest in a possible peace conference. Furthermore, the political and philosophical foundation of the conference concerned – the principle of self-determination – had only been born one year before. The principle that even small nations could have the right for a state of their own was not very common in the world and Europe. It was a principle rejected by the majority of states and politicians.

June of 1919 presented Estonians with a unique opportunity. We achieved our tactical and strategic objectives, both in war and politics. In addition, we achieved our national political and ideological goals as a nation.

The joint victory of the Latvians and Estonians at Võnnu allowed Estonia to deploy all its military forces to the Eastern Front, to defy the main enemy. As early as that autumn, our opponent made the one and only peace offer in its history. We won our freedom; we won peace.

But we should also remember that our victorious summer, 90 years ago, also had its down side. Yes, indeed, it helped to mobilise fresh, young men to join the Defence Forces. But, predominately, national propaganda viewed the victory over the Landeswehr as the end to 700 years of slavery. This was sweet payback, becoming the cornerstone of our nation's foundation.

This is exactly what could have blurred Estonia's world vision in the 1930s. Unfortunately, even the clearest vision would have been unable to change the course of history on the shores of the Baltic Sea.

Respected countrymen.

The achievements of the War of Independence need to be protected daily. For countries that are ten or even a hundred times bigger than Estonia, security is not a value, which emerges on

its own. We need to make an effort towards maintaining it all the time. It requires lots of money. On its worst days, it also requires the lives of people, as we all experienced, freshly and painfully, only some days ago.

Both in Estonia and Europe, the sense of security has changed considerably in the year that has passed since the last Victory Day. August of last year showed that those who believed in the end of history and the arrival of eternal peace in Europe were, unfortunately, mistaken. The war between Russia and Georgia changed Europe's security paradigm. Through this, we have learned that attempts to change state borders by military force are not, regrettably, a thing of the past.

Today, aside from our concerns, we can say that the change of the current paradigm has been accompanied by a number of positive developments. NATO is, once again, devoting more attention to the organisation's main goal, the collective defence of its territory, as well as Article 5 and defence plans. In that regard, there is no doubt that such developments will build up our security.

However, there are some developments that will be treated with great caution within Europe's security political space. We would like to know exactly what is meant by Europe's new security structure. The existing structure has worked well. Why should it be dismantled? Why should we strive for something new and, supposedly, better when the provider of the new structure has consistently diminished the efficiency of the existing structure over the past decade?

A strong European Union and NATO are the best guarantees for Europe's security and stability. In a wider sense, trans-Atlantic connections between democratic European countries and the United States of America and Canada are vital. Today, ties are probably stronger than ever since the end of the Cold War.

Dear friends.

Aside from the wider security political picture, there are matters we have to take responsibility for by ourselves and for which it would be inappropriate to count on the assistance of our allies. As for Estonian society as a whole, the past year has not been easy for Estonia's national defence. In Estonia, the recession has been more apparent than in the majority of other European countries. This has also brought about setbacks in the funding of national defence. In times when the budgets of all spheres are being cut, national defence will also suffer.

I am glad that common sense has prevailed in the national defence budget cuts. Despite several negative budgets, we have been able to keep the big goals of our national defence alive.

In reflecting on last year, I would like to highlight the reservist training of the Defence Forces. The system, which is based on compulsory military service, cannot function if the reserve forces do not gather regularly. In a modern war, the reservists will not be of much help without military follow-up training and practice.

Secondly, allow me to acknowledge our Defence League members. The Defence League is one of the highest forms of civil society, as volunteering and military structures do not ordinarily match. Those who come from non-democratic societies are unable to understand those who are willing to put their own lives at risk, voluntarily.

Let us reflect today on the fact that the memory of those soldiers, who have sacrificed their lives for the freedom of Estonia in numerous wars, will best be treasured by our belief in ourselves, in our nation and in our country. Up until now, we have been able to do this, and I am sure we will continue to do so in the future.

As I said last night in Tallinn, I invite everybody tomorrow to take flowers to the closest Monument to the War of Independence in your parish, in your neighbourhood.

Only then will we understand that the men and women who brought freedom to the people of Estonia came from the very soil, the very place, you come from yourself.

Give thanks, in your thoughts, to those who brought you freedom. And also, recognise that it is us who have the opportunity and duty to give meaning to Estonia's history in the coming decade.

Our skills, desire and work will show whether we can think of the heroes, who brought us this freedom, without a feeling of shame, with our heads held high at the 100th anniversary of the Victory Day.

I wish you all the strength to fulfil this task.

As I wish you all a beautiful Victory Day and wonderful Midsummer Day.