

Our forebears founded this country 92 years ago because they wanted the right to decide, to act and to stand on their own. Today we can desire no less. My dear Estonian people, dear friends.

Ever since it dawned on our 19th century forebears that Estonians are equal to other nations, we have found our path strewn with obstacles.

We have overcome these obstacles. Although often they were higher than the barriers others had to surmount, we succeeded.

At every major turn in the road, naysayers appeared. Milestones such as the first song festival, the Vanemuine Theatre in which we are gathered today, the War of Independence, the founding and restoration of an independent state, the use of Estonian as the language of instruction at the university level – all were said to be impossible, that Estonians would never succeed.

The sceptics were wrong. We did succeed.

Even in the worst of times, it is customary for Estonians to come together on the 24th of February, in person or in spirit, to think about what must be done better – by the government, but not only by the government; by our fellow citizens, but not only our fellow citizens. Above all, we must think about what we ourselves can do.

If not here, if not now, when?

My dear Estonian people.

The most troubling problem currently we need to solve is unemployment. In the good years of economic growth, we came to believe that the unemployed themselves were to blame.

This is no longer the case. Companies laid off people not because of poor performance but because of their own economic problems.

That is why we all – the government, the private sector, organisations and churches, political parties and families alike – must seek to curtail and ease the hardship faced by people and their loved ones.

There are no simple remedies. We need to look for solutions inside ideas and behind taboos. We must ensure that the economic and social consequences of unemployment do not leave wounds that cannot be healed.

Growing unemployment is not something that crept up on us silently. There is no consolation to be found in the fact that some countries are in even worse shape. But that realization does lead to a valuable insight: our problems are not unique.

We do need to be unique in how we solve our problems, for no one else will do it for us.

Let us not deceive ourselves with the hope that the unemployment rate will start falling quickly. Twenty years ago, Finland was hit by a recession just as widespread. The country returned to economic growth two years later, but it took six years for employment to recover.

We have a duty to help the unemployed preserve their self-dignity. Receiving assistance is nothing to be ashamed of. But not lending a hand is.

I currently see no other option but to prepare for the worst and do everything in our power to ease the economic impact of unemployment, and particularly its social impact.

A substantial amount has been done, but it is not enough. We should realize that the job market cannot be controlled by the system we have designed; rather, the system must adapt to the current situation in the job market.

Yes, it is true that unlike in the last major crisis, we now have unemployment insurance. Because of it, we are in a better situation. Many people, however, have been without a job for so long that they now find themselves that their insurance has run out and now lack any significant unemployment benefits.

We will have to look for ways of extending the period that benefits can be drawn from the Unemployment Fund – if there is a way of doing so while adhering to the necessary requirement of a balanced budget.

Poverty, one of the most harrowing consequences of unemployment, hits children especially hard. The Republic of Estonia's family benefits are, of course, meant for children, but if parents must also live off of this sum, then it is time to consider additional benefits.

We have found support from the European Union's assistance measures. Wage support and tax incentives are reasonable steps when it comes to giving jobs to people with less competitive qualifications. I encourage employers to make maximum use of these opportunities. Entrepreneurs are the ones who give people work.

We should not fear subsidized employment, which has generated much controversy. The point of such jobs is to keep people accustomed to going to work and to prevent them from lapsing into apathy or despair. They are not a solution to the root problems of unemployment, of course.

One lesson that can be drawn from the crisis is that unemployment is not evenly distributed. For instance, IT company executives complain that they do not have enough people. There is a shortage of people in science and engineering.

This is a clear signal for students, parents and Estonia's education leaders: do not avoid subjects that might currently seem harder and more demanding.

My dear fellow Estonians.

Today, at the dawn of a new decade, we have to take a look back at our nearly twenty years of

restored independence and ask ourselves honestly:

Which future-oriented and thus indispensable issues yet need to be decided?

As I see it, we need to show more resolve in the field of education and public administration.

I note with growing concern that the desire to modernize Estonia's educational system and the education we provide is becoming bogged down in political conflict and opposition from interest groups.

When all roads to reform lead to a dead end, everything seems dismal. All we see are the potential losses; the victories become an awkward subject.

But if we had been this fearful and hesitant 18 years ago – had we invented excuses to postpone currency reform – then I am afraid we would still be using the rouble in Estonia.

Indecisiveness itself is tantamount to defeat, and those whose voice cannot be heard have the most to lose: students, tomorrow's business leaders and workforce, artists and composers, future mothers and fathers, the stewards and champions of Estonia's values and the nation's progress. The people who keep the Estonian language and culture vital lose out.

The quality of education comes down to one absolute criterion: are Estonian students and their skills and knowledge internationally competitive or not? Can they do their job better than their counterparts in a neighbouring country?

I do not mean the best. I mean the average.

Second. Administrative reform has long since become a tired refrain to a sad song, a byword for Estonia's few yet no less significant failures.

For some strange reason, any discussion about the reasonable administration of local affairs ends up in the redrawing of municipal boundaries. We pursue emotional or symbolic victories while trying to hold on to our little piece of power, money or land, and we lose sight of the bigger picture. We forget that a given rural municipality's largest employer is the municipal government itself, or that for a long time there has been no daycare, no school or store. It may well happen that the most important consideration for decisions affecting the future of the community is the bus schedule.

There is no point in having government on either the national or local level if we lack the means and skills with which to govern. It discredits the meaning of government and the Republic itself.

And the people are not waiting. They are catching the bus – either to a larger city or leaving Estonia. Those unable or unwilling to leave, stay and suffer.

They suffer, because the humane principle set forth in Estonian constitution – that everyone

has a right to quality public services regardless of where they live – has not yet reached many corners and parts of Estonia.

Estonia deserves better. Among other things, Estonia deserves to abandon the notion that, during election season, politicians are exempt from the duty of making the necessary, reasonable decisions.

If the helm is abandoned in favour of drifting with the current, we will soon reach stagnation. And we will find statesmanship replaced by a cynical calculation degrading to citizens.

Dear friends,

One of the lessons of the current economic crisis is clear: populist electioneering and political one-upmanship comes at a price paid by the Estonian people and the country we share.

It is one year until the next general elections. As a citizen and a voter, I would like to see political parties reach a reasonable agreement on the topics they will focus on in the upcoming campaigns.

I feel that these topics should be Estonian public administration; the future of education; harmonizing tax and budgetary policy with society's long-term needs; and energy security.

We also need consensus on rules of play, the methods used to amend legislation.

Many top Estonian lawyers, legal scholars and influential thinkers have called for an end to amending legislation for light and transient causes. Estonia's legal system is, by in large, complete, and Estonia is in practice a state governed by the rule of law. Let us now allow traditions, jurisprudence and practice to take shape.

For this reason, we must not waste time on writing useless legislative texts. Laws are a means, not an end. It is the same way with money.

The quality of legislation is a separate question. Sometimes legal acts contain careless errors, other times logical contradictions. Sometimes they are in conflict with the Constitution.

All of this suggests that our parliament could be more attentive to its main task.

A month ago, I admonished Estonia's journalists to be more accurate. I asked them to refrain from attacking parliament as an institution. Instead they should focus on specific individuals and their errors.

Today I would like to take this opportunity to appeal to the consciences of the members of the 11th Riigikogu. You were elected for a four-year term. But the Riigikogu was created to last for all time.

By upholding your reputation, you safeguard the Riigikogu and, along with it, democracy in

Estonia. So please – take your own colleagues to task if it seems that they do not know how to, or do not want to, shoulder the responsibility vested in their seats. Whether the errors of fellow MPs involve deficient legislation or improper conduct, take them to task, and do so publicly.

My dear Estonian people.

We know that there can be no going back to the earlier period of economic growth founded on inexpensive loan capital.

We know that there is no way to get rich by borrowing other people's money. We know that quality means more than speed.

Looking ahead honestly to Estonia's future and our possibilities requires a fundamental decision. More precisely, an answer to the question: What kind of Estonia do we want? Enterprising or paternalistic?

Right now, in the grip of the recession and high unemployment, we see that many people need help coping with everyday life.

Besides governing and making laws, helping people in need is one of the most fundamental duties of the state.

It is the right thing to do during a recession. But how will we act when things start getting better again?

When we read news from some European Union member states, we see how problems are ballooning for welfare states that try to mend social safety nets with borrowed money. They are forced to look for different kinds of solutions. They are forced to bring the state's role into conformity with the economic reality.

This is why I believe that Estonia's cause will be advanced best by investments, incentives and grants that reward doing and enterprise, innovation and creativity.

Estonia will be led forward by enterprising and educated citizens who create new values – be they in business, science or culture. It is such citizens that we must train our efforts on raising, as soon as the first and most difficult days of the crisis are over.

It will require an altogether more serious approach to education and the money we are prepared to pay for it. It means focusing on public health, our people's lifespan and the possibilities afforded by our pension system.

Will we open Estonia to foreign workers or work longer ourselves? This is the question we will have to answer.

These are not easy choices, but it would be irresponsible to ignore them. We cannot allow ourselves that. These are choices that must be made when we have emerged from the crisis.

But we must start to think about them now.

Dear fellow citizens.

Today is Estonia's birthday. It would be unjust to leave unmentioned those things we have done well, better than in years past.

Last year, 100 people lost their lives on Estonia's roads. Yes, one hundred is a large number. But just a few years ago that number was twice as large.

When we compare the number of what are called preventable deaths – accidents, crimes, fires and drownings – with the same statistic from 15 years ago, the number has decreased many times over.

These numbers attest to the fact that negligence, malice and foolhardiness are being supplanted by a greater amount of stability and compassion.

Second, we have the habit of criticizing politicians – I did so myself a moment ago – for not reaching consensus on important issues. Fortunately there are exceptions.

I consider one to be the goal to adopt the common European currency, the Euro, in Estonia. I recognize the statesmanlike sense of responsibility our parties have displayed and I laud Estonian media for their sense of balance. On this issue, we have thus far succeeded in suppressing our urge to get the better of each other politically. We have not given in to the urge to turn minor details into insurmountable obstacles.

Naturally the euro will bring more investments and new jobs. But the euro alone will not solve any one of our problems.

It is like accession to NATO or the European Union. The euro will boost our self-confidence and sense of security, by underlining the fact that our own money and outside investment will not lose value.

It is not only foreign investors who need that assurance, but any one of the everyday folks who have traded in kroons at currency exchange booths on the basis of groundless rumours.

Exerting real effort toward the euro gives us the spine and character we need to resist the temptation to seek populist solutions.

The decision on whether we will get the euro is due in a few months. Everyone has been a part of it and contributed, in the form of lower wages and more meagre benefits.

My heartfelt acknowledgement goes out to every citizen and fellow countrymen for stoically bearing that burden – for understanding that today's sacrifices will pay off in the future. I thank Estonia's taxpayers who have not resorted in these troubled times to looking for ways of evading taxes.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Ten months and a week from now, when Estonia becomes a member of the European monetary union, we will be the most integrated state in northern Europe. I repeat: the most integrated.

Of the countries in Northern Europe, only Estonia is a participant in all four integration programs involving Western democracies – the euro zone, the Schengen acquis, the European Union and NATO.

That means Estonia has never found itself so firmly at the centre of Europe. Never. This gives us an immense sense of security. It also gives us the responsibility of knowing what is going on in our four common spaces. It imposes on us the obligation to participate in the dialogue, if we want to be a functioning part of the centre of Europe.

Unlike a number of countries that have already adopted the euro, Estonia already now pursues the kind of policy that the well-being of the euro zone requires. We are at the centre of Europe because our way of doing things is the European way, as it was in fact, meant to be.

Estonia's credibility and trustworthiness are the most priceless foreign exchange asset we have.

My dear Estonian people.

Independence Day is not a party but a family get-together. This is the right place for taking stock of what has been done – the triumphs, the missteps, and what is yet to come.

This is a time for discussing among ourselves. There is no point in boasting, or acting as if everything is just fine. There is no point in trying to shift the blame.

Times of crisis tend to breed discontent and the illusion that these are the darkest days we have ever known.

No, these are not the darkest of days. In spite of it all, Estonia and Estonians are in fact in better off than they have been at any time in the last century.

But if we want the country we have built ourselves to be even stronger and better, we must continue to work and strive. We must give up the fatalism, more befitting of an adolescent, that things are out of our hands, that someone else is calling the shots. Nothing is fated, nothing "anyway". Not even the regaining of our independence was predestined, not something that would have happened one way or another.

Back in the 19th century, people said that Estonians would "anyway" never succeed in instituting Estonian-language university education. But we did.

A hundred years ago, people said that Estonians “anyway” would never win the War of Independence or get on with the responsibility of independence. But we did.

Twenty years ago; we heard that Estonians “any way” would not regain their freedom or succeed in being a viable free nation. But we did.

“Anyway” we were never supposed to get into the European Union or NATO. But we did.

Nothing happens of its own accord – not war, not the so called selling out of Estonia by our partners, or anything else espoused by a narrow worldview.

Besides a lack of resources, the economic crisis also results in a feeling of helplessness, that we cannot do anything one way or another. This, unfortunately, is sustained by the myths we have created of our past.

What is more important – 700 years of serfdom or 92 years of statehood?

What is more important – 50 years of occupation or 20 years of statehood built in common cause?

Does our national identity lie in how much we have suffered as a people? Or does it lie in what we have done ourselves? Will we let the past define us, or will we grasp where we are today and the opportunities of tomorrow?

Each of us has the power to determine Estonia’s destiny as a nation. We need not dream of someone else’s wise and judicious hand at the helm.

Let us acknowledge openly and proudly that as a nation, we have truly succeeded.

Let us acknowledge that if we continue to make wise and judicious choices, we shall succeed in solving even the problems to which quick and easy solutions are not yet visible.

Let us acknowledge that by making difficult decisions, we have laid the foundation for recovery.

Today, with a new morning already glimmering on the horizon, Estonia stands within reach of the best possible ways forward – this time on the strength of what Estonia herself has wrought, not foreign capital.

Our forebears founded this country 92 years ago because they wanted the right to decide, to act and to stand on their own. They wanted the same for us, their children, grandchildren and future generations.

Today we can desire no less. Nothing has changed in this regard: it can all still be done in this country we have created together. This is what the Republic of Estonia is for. Happy Independence Day, and long live Estonia!