

Distinguished members of the Defence Forces and Defence League,
My dear Estonian people,

Estonia first became independent amid the collapse of defunct, antiquated empires, which presented many nations with an opportunity for self-determination and statehood.

But the mere opportunity to establish an independent state would not have been enough. Above all, we had to realize that we wanted it, that we desired to seize control of our destiny.

The idea of a country called Estonia had to be ripe in our minds in order for us to act at the right moment. The national soul had to be prepared to stand up for its goals and, if necessary, to defend them.

And as we know, our forebears had to go to war and give their lives to defend their right to independence.

Victory in the War of Independence represented the triumph of the nation's spirit over doubt and fear. We were travelling down an unknown path, but our aim was clear.

Social origin, wealth, education or ethnicity – these were not important in the National Army which fought in the War of Independence. For the volunteers who were the first to leap to Estonia's defence, ideals and loyalty to their principles were paramount.

In the Estonian National Army, soldiers of different nationalities fought side by side – Germans and Russians, Finns and Latvians, Jews and other peoples of Estonia, sons of nobles and peasants, merchants and students.

They all fought for democracy and the Republic of Estonia.

Estonia was our common cause in the War of Independence: It still is today.

Dear friends,

Just as in the Estonian National Army back in the days of the War of Independence, the social origin and ethnicity of conscripts and officers are not important in today's Estonian defence forces. Many Estonian citizens of Russian, Ukrainian and other ethnicities serve alongside ethnic Estonians.

Estonian defence forces have been mentioned before as an example of a good integration environment, and I think with good reason. Where else would an Estonian from Võru County and a young Russian from Narva meet?

But the defence forces do not only bring Estonians and Russians together. After all, the question is not only about whether boys from Võru County and Narva will meet each other at some point in their lives. The question is about how and when the sons of, say, a Lääne County fisherman and a Tartu professor will cross paths.

Yes, it might happen at university, but it is quite unlikely anywhere else. And that is a problem.

It is a problem because Estonia is too small to permit itself to have different social layers who pass each other like ships in the night.

The strength – and indeed the appeal of a small state – lies in the fact that government minister and workingman, and writer and farmer, are acquaintances in everyday life, and have topics to discuss among themselves. A small country can be successful only if it is open and democratic.

We will succeed only if the elite is an elite only in the idealistic sense, not in the sense of a clique that is exclusionary or contemptuous regarding the rest of society.

If some young man who happens to be a member of the elite goes on the record saying that he considers military service a waste of time, it doesn't matter whether he is a politician, pop star or athlete – he is certainly not a member of the elite in the idealistic sense.

Dear fellow Estonians,

Two days ago, we marked the 70th anniversary of the dark day on which Estonia conceded to the occupation forces, forfeiting its independence and the right to decide its own destiny.

Since that time, we have often heard it said or we have said it ourselves: we really should not have given up without a fight. It has been a subject of debate for 70 years.

The wound of independence lost does not heal; it continues to be divisive, a stigma; it feeds arcane interpretations of our history and sometimes keeps us from peacefully setting tomorrow's goals.

Seventy years ago, every young man of a certain age had the obligation to serve in the Estonian military. At that time, we had an army of reserves that could have put up a fight if necessary and if there was the political will to do so.

Today's Estonian defence forces are likewise based on a reservist army. The primary goal of military service is to give every citizen in good health a modern basic military training so that at a time of need we would have men and women capable of defending their country.

Compulsory military service is not enough for achieving this goal. It also requires us to train reservists and to have an impeccable mobilization system, personnel and weaponry.

The reserve training exercise system has recently become fully operational. I am sincerely glad about that.

For those who are for whatever reason unable to perform compulsory military service, Estonia offers the option of alternative service, which is no less important. This, too, allows the state to

become stronger internally.

Military service and effective alternative service are an unequivocally clear way for young Estonians to prove that they are not indifferent to how their country fares.

If military service or alternative service is seen as a waste of time, as something to be done by others, then I fear there is no point in asking whether we should we have resisted, 70 years ago.

If we are not ready to stand up for our country, why should we expect the country to stand up for us? Why should we expect to be able to freely pursue happiness within the European Union, or be part of a common security system as a NATO member?

Members of the Defence Forces and Defence League,
Dear friends,

The Estonian Defence League was born right here in Viljandi County, when remnants of the Tsarist army on the World War One front in Latvia began posing a threat to Estonian homes. The led to the creation of the Sakala unit and an idea that is still proving its vitality close to a hundred years later.

We know the Defence League today as a voluntary initiative that expresses our people's will to defend civil society. But its role remains unchanged.

A potential aggressor will not be daunted by our population or our army – both are small in number. But it will think twice if it understands that the people are ready to defend their country and have the ability to do so if necessary. That the people will resist if called upon.

I feel pride when I look at the ranks of Defence League members lined up here today. I felt exactly the same sense of pride a week ago when I heard a US Marine Corps officer acknowledging the professionalism of Estonian military personnel in the NATO joint operation BALTOPS. These soldiers were, namely, Defence Leaguers.

Dear fellow citizens,

Today, on Victory Day, our thoughts turn to the armed defence of Estonia. While it is true that NATO protects us, it can do so effectively only if we are ourselves prepared to defend our country, as conscripts and reservists, in alternative service and the Defence League.

By doing so, we protect the rights, opportunities and liberties of an independent democracy. Let us protect these values.

And may we remember our forefathers and foremothers, the victors of the War of Independence, to whom we owe our gratitude for our independence. I call on everyone today to lay flowers at the War of Independence monument closest to their home. May it become a beautiful tradition, the way we give thanks as a nation.

I wish you all a lovely Victory Day!