

My beloved Estonian people,
Dear friends,

As a small nation, we have a keen sense of how fragile and vulnerable we are. Every loss brings a pain that is both personal and shared.

Tragedies put us to the test – as individuals, as a society, as a country. Especially when the victims are children. Especially when the tragedy is another in a long line of misfortunes that have befallen us.

I ask everyone to rise to their feet, both here and in homes across the country, to remember those who lost their lives on Sunday in Haapsalu. /..../

Thank you.

Feeling genuine pain, and acknowledging the importance of each and every person here in Estonia, we have a clear sense of our special obligation as citizens of a small nation and state.

And that is the obligation to care for our fellow citizens and treat them with greater tolerance, attention and respect.

That, not politics, is what I want to talk about today.

Today, on the birthday of the Estonian state, let us talk about you and me, and our neighbours, relatives and co-workers. Let us talk about all people in Estonia, people we may not know personally but whose common threads run side by side, uninterrupted, like the striped patterns of Estonian folk costume.

They run together, as one fabric, on the loom of fate.

Ladies and gentlemen.

This year will mark the 20th anniversary of the restoration of Estonian independence -- almost an entire generation.

We all belong to the first generation of re-independent Estonia, no matter what our age or origin. As we gaze upon what we have wrought, there is in our eyes the pride of a builder, the critical mindset of an owner, and the loving short-sightedness of a parent.Â Looking back from a distance of a few generations, our great-grandchildren will have to admit that yes, Estonia fulfilled the goal of her people in those first twenty years:

to do everything in her power to prevent the tragedy of the 20th century from happening again.

This was done through deliberations and government administrations, exertions and even sacrifice. It was done in a consistent, resolute fashion.

Our goal was to integrate, and be integrated – within our own borders and with respect to Europe – the Europe that the Young Estonia movement dreamed of a century ago.

This is so that we could feel safe and secure and bold here in our storm-scarred homeland.

That is no small feat for one generation. Few countries that have emerged from under totalitarianism and violent occupation have managed to do what Estonia has achieved.

For that, we should thank the governments who had the courage to prefer tough decisions to popularity.

Most of all, though, future historians would give the Estonian people their due. They would credit you, your spouse, your parents and children for recognizing the difficult decisions that had to be made and for having the will to support those decisions; for tightening your bootstraps and shouldering obligations.

They would credit a people who did not err into populism, who did not falter or turn aside or back.

In the grand scheme of things, in the large tapestry of the Estonian story, we have closed one chapter, the one that started in 1991, when we emerged from the valley of shadow.

This chapter can truly be considered closed. Perhaps not just a chapter, but a volume, epic, an odyssey, entitled "The Return." And our tomorrow still shines with hope.

But what next? Where will Estonia head now? In what direction, if we do not need to depart from the past course?

We worry that maybe there are no more goals. We even conduct surveys of the population to learn what the next goal might be.

Dear friends.

This is understandable. We all understand that a task that will span the next generation consists of more than simply taking an assigned test. Mere growth in GDP or wages cannot be the goal.

Naturally everyone should be guaranteed a respectable standard of living. The well-being of the country's economy is important. But our intangible well-being is just as important. Remaining true to our core values. Faith in a good future.

We should no longer be haunted by the occupation-era fear: whether we and our language and culture will survive.

Because we have "made it." And we will continue to succeed.

We are not naïve; the people know and remember what a totalitarian regime was like. They remember what it did and how it did it, in the seventh spring of peace as well as the thirty-seventh. The reign of terror has been described and exposed thoroughly in Estonian culture and literature and by historical inquiry.

We should no longer be ruled by fear.

In the absence of fear, fairness becomes important. The rules of fair play must be universal, in every walk of life. That includes elections and party politics.

That means not misusing money that actually belongs to the people and taxpayers.

Promises and patronage must not be for sale, not at home or abroad, or in secret and illegally, with a plan to essentially thwart democratic elections. Nor can the legitimacy of the elections be placed in doubt.

To put it even more simply – honesty and fairness is important for a free people.

Attempts at dirty tricks reawaken all of the old fears, which everyone has seen so much effort to

rid themselves of.

But let it be clear: the people will not let the fear come back.

And that is why it is important for every one of us, every full-grown Estonian citizen, to take part in determining our future. It is important that we go to the polls and vote.

But an election, ladies and gentlemen, is only one means of shaping our life in a free country. It is one of the many choices, but far from the only one.

The thing that has surprised and cheered me most of all in the last five years is the understanding of what the citizenry in Estonia has been able to accomplish of their own free will in societies, associations and organizations, as individuals who sense their freedom of action. Above all, liberty and living in a free country means being able to live our own lives without asking anyone higher up for permission to do so.

These include the New World community organization, the NO99 theatre's United Estonia production, Let's Do It community action day, Estonian Food Bank, university organizations and fraternities and sororities, the Red Cross and the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, the Defence League and its junior organizations the Kodutütred and Noorkotkad, Caritas, the Supilinn society, the Estonian Fund for Nature, and countless others.

These organizations attest to how we can make our lives better every day, influence society, help our fellow citizens, and conserve the environment.

Collectively they are Estonia, and they strengthen life in our country, being the connective tissue of our land. Each one of them makes us more independent and free, and by doing so, they make life in Estonia better.

They are the source of our power for countering apathy and stagnation, cynicism and petty

bloody-mindedness, for saying no to an indifference that could otherwise prove dispiriting.

These worthy associations also show how far we have come in twenty years. It shows that without “dear leaders,” parties and slogans, we can make our lives and our surroundings in the image of our hearts.

Our co-existence in Estonia naturally also depends on our political choices. But to an increasing degree, it depends on our own everyday choices, not on the president, government, parliament, parties, ministry officials, or city or municipal authorities.

As the Constitution states, the supreme power is vested in the Estonian people. And not just on Election Day, as the current campaign constantly emphasizes. No: truly every day.

Dear friends.

There are many choices as to what direction to take and how to best apply our skills and interests. These are not the concerns of one who has just emerged from occupation.

They are the choices of a full-fledged, adult European.

I know that sounds abstract, but it is true:Â our future course and our sense of mission is not necessarily so much about statehood or government – it comes down to ourselves and our own choices and decisions.

I don’t want to downplay the government’s role. The government and local governments are still responsible for making sure our roads are in good condition, that our streets are safe and that education throughout Estonia is of a calibre that encourages the countryside to bloom instead of becoming a desert.

We should have no tolerance for a situation where medical care, a good education and even food is available only in larger towns. I steadfastly believe that it should be possible to live everywhere in Estonia.

Naturally it is not enough merely to redraw municipal boundaries. We need comprehensive city and municipal reform. We know it all too well. Perhaps that realization will become reality in the next generation.

In the same manner, no government can ignore either unemployment or lack of skilled workers.

We now share many of the concerns that seemed superfluous 20 years ago. We have access to all of Europe now, and as Europeans, the overwhelming majority of the world is open to us.

Free citizens do what is given unto freemen – they study, work and live where their skills, interests or calling leads them.

Estonians were emancipated from serfdom only seven generations ago –if we consider the time we spent as a captive nation, we have been freemen for less than that. We do not want that time back.

Estonia's drawing power cannot be coercion, fear or obligation. Estonia's appeal must lie somewhere else. Estonia must be so likeable and liveable a place that the ones who are here want to stay; the ones that left seek to return; and all the rest, who have skills and savoir faire and take an interest in, or even love our land and people, want to come here.

But this does not mean attracting foreign investments. This does not mean higher salaries or lower tax rates than elsewhere – no, far from it.

The key lies in a completely different angle: to be the kind of country where we ourselves want to live.

I am thinking of a country where we care about our fellow man and woman, where we are tolerant and affirming and do not fall into bitterness and envy.

A country where your hard work – studying Estonian language and culture, graduation from school, learning a trade – is compensated fairly by the fact that the rest is up to you and your own industriousness.

Not whether you are a man or woman, whether you come from Nasva, Narva or Narvik, or whether your parents were professors or porters.

A country where children on the way to school in the morning cross at the zebra crossing and know that drivers are looking out for them. Where schools reward accomplishment and are like encouraging friends that can be relied on, not gladiator arenas.

I am thinking of people who feel they have a stake in whether their next-door neighbour has enough kindling wood to last this cold winter.

I am thinking of the realization that the people in nursing homes and hospitals are flesh and blood – *our* flesh and blood. The understanding that there are disabled children living in our midst, and that we can help them, spend time with them.

Dear fellow Estonians

All this, I know, seems simple, too simple. Such talk may strike you as too soft and make you feel uncomfortable. Yet the tasks, opportunities and needs facing our next generation cannot be described in quantitative terms like a budget deficit or export volumes.

These numbers must be followed and tracked, just as every full-grown person must not neglect

their health. But that is not a goal of itself.

Quality of life is probably something many are not accustomed to thinking about. Yet I am convinced that quality of life is the factor that has the greatest bearing on Estonia's future, not fears of the past, investment volumes, or tax rates.

Only quality of life will bring the world's best minds to Estonia and make Estonia a part of the world economy.

The conversations I have had with Estonians who have moved abroad have indicated that their salary figure is not the factor that decides whether they will return. Yes, they acknowledge that there is a salary gap. But they tend to immediately add that the differences will probably not last long.

What they are actually staying away from is the fact there is largely a closed, introverted aspect to life in Estonia. We have been preservationists for too long – we are doubtless the best in the world at holding on to our language, culture over centuries and under various rulers. We have not quit.

And this is understandable, necessary. It can even be successful. But it is a closed stance.

We need a brighter, more open stance for the new chapter in Estonian history. We are here, and we do not need to prove it anymore.

By opening ourselves up slightly more to other nationalities, lifestyles, appearances, languages, opinions, we have much to gain. Perhaps we will even gain in that we will get to know ourselves even better.

If a person opens his heart to those who are in distress or challenged, whether due to financial reasons or a physical or mental disability, that benefactor's own quality of life jumps a notch –

they become richer in spirit.

Our blind faith in various rankings and indexes where Estonia is compared to other countries is nothing if not proof of our own insecurities.

So is the attitude that what we do becomes truly valuable only if someone else lends it their seal of approval.

On a human level, of course, I understand the desire to have our status and merit corroborated from abroad. But it has a downside: we are stingy with our praise for our talented and diligent people unless they have already won recognition outside Estonia.

Let's change that attitude in the next generation. This is within our power. We do not have to elect people with acrimonious agendas to parliament; we do not have to read pejorative comments online, to say nothing of anonymous pejorative comments.

Quality of life is never manufactured by any government; it cannot be stipulated by legislators or proclaimed by the president. It is up to the people themselves.

Ladies and gentlemen.

When our self-esteem depends so much on outside opinion, we may fail to notice the quiet, sometimes powerful or even dramatic changing of the outside world itself.

We hear it said more and more often, often in worried tones, that Estonia, the Baltic states and Eastern Europe as a whole are no longer at the centre of international attention. Some take it as a sign that no one cares about us anymore, that we have been left hanging and that the horror of the past could consequently be repeated.

To me, it seems like proof that the world's areas of concern lie elsewhere, that it is now our duty to help relieve problems in other places.

In the next 20 years, being part of Europe will become more and more important for us. The geopolitical balance of the last century is shifting. China is on the ascendant, and, when viewed separately, the largest countries in the European Union are at best only medium or small countries.

If we stop to think about it, we should realize that Estonia's opportunities in this new world order lie above all in deep-seated integration.

In terms of depth, the events of the last month in North Africa should reverberate no less powerfully than the ones 20 years ago in Europe, which transformed post-World War II life completely.

We do not know where it will all end up. Changes to the old system do not necessarily spell the arrival of a new and better era. We remember setbacks and repercussions, even here in Europe.

20 years from now some thought it was dangerous for Estonia to break free. We were warned and lectured, directly and off the record, that rocking the boat might create instability and strain relations with the authoritarian regime.

Let us remember that, whenever we feel tired and frustrated with democracy. There are people, entire nations and regions that are ready to die to unseat dictators, to give their children freedom and human dignity. Let us think about that.

The shifting of the balance and centre of gravity, the development of new configurations of power being seen in the world as a whole is taking place in Europe itself. The same prejudices against Estonia that we experienced in past decades are disappearing; they have done so thanks to our own work and accomplishments.

About ten years ago, in setting a goal to strive for, I sketched a picture of Estonia as a Nordic country.

Today we can already declare that, whether in terms of responsible finance and budgetary policy or openness in trade policy or government; low corruption on the state level or IT solutions, Estonia is quietly and truly becoming a Nordic country.

We are finding that we belong to that very part of Europe that we dreamed of for many years. If we continue just as responsibly and conscientiously, we will get there.

To all of the companions on this journey both here and at home, I would like to confide the following:Â Â In using my privilege of speaking at today's birthday celebration, I sensed a special duty to express precisely certain things that have been building up inside me for the last four and a half years.

If I were to articulate what I want to see happen more than before, and for the good of more people than before, it would sound something like this: I want us to have trust in ourselves. I want us to trust our fellow citizens.

My dream for the next 20 years is just this: that we become a caring and tolerant people. Not that we tap into our reserves of empathy and compassion only when some terrible thing has befallen us.

The horrible fire in Haapsalu this weekend and the response to it had a very personal effect on me. Years ago, as honorary patron of the Special Olympics, I helped with fundraising and organizing charity concerts for mentally disabled children. I spent time with them, went hiking together.

I can't claim that these events were particularly well-attended or covered by the media.

Our attitudes toward people who are weaker or different from some of us must become evident in our actions before tragedies happen, not in pointing of fingers after the fact.

We are interwoven with each other, through families, extended families, as a people. We all make up Estonia's nervous system. Every event, especially tragic ones, has an immediate, galvanic effect on us, felt as a sudden painful sensation, a direct sense of loss.

This pain is cleansing and helps answer the question of who we really are.

We are not numb. We are not unfeeling. We are not hardened. It is good to see this.

Estonia is not yet completed. Thank God for that.

Estonia will never be finished. It will grow better and stronger. It will mature into a more open and bigger-hearted Estonia, through our common love and caring.

Happy Independence Day to us all. Long live Estonia!