

Distinguished members of the Defence Forces and Defence League,
my dear fellow citizens.

Ninety-two years ago on this date, the Estonian national forces achieved a victory near Cesis that allowed us to get down to actually building our young country.

Unfortunately our state was not given much time back then. Little more than twenty years later, a pact between totalitarian powers followed by war in Europe brought our independence to an end. In less than two months, we will celebrate the 20th anniversary of the restoration of Estonian independence.

Twenty years is a short time, especially for countries and societies that measure their existence in centuries. But twenty years is also a long time. It is widely considered to be the length of one generation. Some of the young people born in re-independent Estonia have already become mothers and fathers. Many have entered the workforce.

Or, to use another example: the Defence League was established on the 11th of November 1918 and was disbanded by the occupation forces on the 27th

of June 1940. Thus the Defence League was able to operate for 21 years, seven months and sixteen days.

The Defence League was reinstated in Estonia on 17 February 1990, when the country was still occupied. As of the 4th of October, the Defence League will have operated longer in the so-called new Estonia than it did during the interwar era of independence.

Dear friends,

Twenty years is a good milestone for looking back at how far we have come in one generation, at what has gone well and what could be done better. What was Estonia like in August 1991?

Thousands of Soviet troops were still in the country. They would leave only three years later, in the summer of 1994, and Paldiski would see the last of them a year later. We had no defence forces of our own in August 1991. We had to start from the ground up. We had a border, but the determination of our border guards notwithstanding, the defence was insubstantial. The state of the economy was deplorable. There were roubles but no goods to buy. But the people's bellies were full of the sweet taste of freedom.

I do not want to compare statistical figures now and 20 years ago. The numbers do not give a true picture or allow either the people's standard of living or the size of the national economy to be measured. But I will join the majority of the people in taking exception with the assertion that life in Estonia in the twilight of the Soviet era and right after the restoration of independence was better than it is now. In some sense, yes, things were less wide open, more fixed. Perhaps more hopeful right after independence was restored. But better? No. It is understandable that as human beings we want to forget the bad and remember the good. It helps us come to terms with our lives. But reconciling ourselves with the present does not mean denying the reality of the past.

Distinguished members of the Defence League.

So, how far have we come today, close to twenty years after re-independence?

We have been members of NATO and the European Union for seven years now. We have grown so used to this knowledge that we tend to forget the difficulties and obstacles we had to overcome to gain entry to these organizations. As a member of the club, it is our prerogative occasionally to be critical of these organizations for not being efficient and flexible enough.

But let us be honest: membership of the European Union and NATO has substantially increased Estonia's security and led to noteworthy economic growth. Our own defence forces and the Defence League have changed beyond recognition compared to the early 1990s. Back then, we

had an army with a great amount of tenacity but nonexistent experience and weaponry and occasional problems with basic discipline; now it is a well-trained defence force with the appropriate arms and equipment, able to deter a potential enemy and pose considerable inconveniences for it. The restoration of the Defence Forces took time, a process that did not happen without mistakes, but today we have arrived at a fairly good outcome.

Offices of armies with much greater experiences and longer traditions have recognized the skills and spirit of our troops in combat situations or exercises. Compulsory military service in the Estonian Defence Forces has become a badge of honour for young Estonian men, not a forced-labour-like punishment that in line with Soviet-era traditions should be avoided at all cost.

The central, perhaps primary backing for our democracy and security has been the vigorous development of civic society. This is the determination of free citizens in a free country to accomplish something themselves, on their own initiative, for the good of their environment, home place, language, culture and country.

Estonian Defence Leaguers and countless societies and associations did not whine to themselves over what they saw as the state's failings. They did not -- and do not -- see their actions as depending on political decisions or the magnanimity of political leaders. If they had, they would still be searching for excuses to stay away from Defence League exercises or reserve officers training, to not hold a village song festival, or to put off keeping Estonian forests well-maintained.

My dear Estonian people,

Estonia has done quite well for itself in these 20 years. This becomes especially clear when we compare our development to most of our fellow nations.

But we want to stand on par with the best, not take satisfaction from outperforming weaker ones. When we became a NATO member in 2004, it may have seemed to some of us that our country's existential worries were solved for ever. Today we know that the years between have brought new security risks that we could have scarcely envisioned 20 years ago. Energy security and cyber defence require daily funding, vigilance and consistent work. Even the traditional threats have not disappeared, as Russia's aggression against Georgia in 2008

showed.

One way or another, we have to admit that Europe's importance as the navel of the world is diminishing. Among other things, it is forcing the world's most powerful military force, the US, to focus on other concerns and regions far from us. And Estonia's sense of security is unfortunately not increased by the fact that many NATO member states have cut their defence spending. It means that Europe is militarily lagging even further behind, leading the US to consider whether there is a point in spending so much money and energy on defending the continent.

Consequently, Estonia's duties also include working to ensure that Europe as a whole is a credible and reliable partner. Whether we like it or not, the security of a small country does not depend only on its own efforts.

Dear fellow Estonians!

We would be making a huge mistake if we saw only external threats to Estonian independence today and in the future. We will remain free and independent as a nation if we defend democracy and the rule of law. We will vindicate the work and exertions of the last two decades only if we act ethically, if we are loyal to our fellow citizens and to the state.

Just a few kilometres from here, a former senior official is serving a long prison sentence for selling Estonian and NATO secrets. Along with the secrets, he was selling our security and independence, and that of our children. Along with that case, we recently experienced a sobering internal political revelation that some are ready to use money from another country to buy a better election result and become the hostages of their bankrollers. Such risks cannot be countered by membership in any organization, no matter how effective the cyber defence or Article Five of NATO.

The fact that our sons undergo compulsory military service will not deter any enemy if the soldier's oath is renounced for lucre behind the lines, with no remorse.

Dear fellow Estonians!

The Estonian people have always been typified by a sober mindset and readiness to attain goals set in a healthy spirit of self-criticism.

I am convinced that these traits have not gone anywhere. And thus we will be able to look to the future as well in a balanced manner without bitterness or euphoria. This is our duty to all men and women whose bravery and self-sacrifice made it possible for us to live in a free country in the first place, to commemorate Victory Day and sit with our family and friends around the midsummer bonfires tonight.

Let us pay tribute to our predecessors, especially those who fell and suffered for the sake of Estonian freedom.

Let us love those we hold dear, and cherish our fellow Estonians and our country.

Long live Estonia!