

Dear linguists, ladies and gentlemen, good friends.

Every strategy is, by nature, a programme for achieving certain objectives. The same can be said about the strategy for developing the Estonian language – a strategy the end and beginning of which we have been invited to witness and discuss here today.

The timeline of these language strategies is seven years. Seven years may seem like an exceptionally long period of time, especially for younger people. Estonia has been a member of NATO and the European Union for seven years. This has become a part of our everyday life, an eternity; we are already having problems remembering our life before NATO and the European Union.

I am definitely not contesting – not at all – the need to set goals for five, seven or ten years, but wouldn't it be appropriate to ask – how do we see the status and future of the Estonian language in 20 and 50 years' time? This is even more important seeing as we have written of the maintenance of nation and culture – and the language as the foundation of all this – into the opening passage of our Constitution.

Every serious forester sets goals for sixty to one hundred years, as only his grandchildren will enjoy the logs made from the fir and oak trees planted today – if they are lucky. Figuratively speaking, language is but a tree, and the development plans of a language should also follow long-term plans.

Anyone who has ever planted a forest will inevitably think of the language used by his great-grandchildren, when some day they will sit under the tree and think and write about it. What will he/she call the tree in the first place?

Dear friends.

As I said – our Constitution has given us both a goal and a commitment. However, practical people occasionally need subtotals and evaluation, as well as honest admittance, that there are things that are possible or impossible to achieve today and tomorrow, and whether this will be expensive, easy or difficult; how can we achieve an objective that is defined in this way in our changing world? What needs to be done for that?

As we know, the Estonian language, as one of the official languages of the European Union, has never enjoyed an official status as high as that. We can regard the Estonian language as a language of culture, and do this for a reason and with pride.

On the other hand, the Estonian language is and will remain a relatively small language that is spoken by approximately one million or 0.015 per cent of the seven billion inhabitants of the world.

This is not very much, and this will not allow us to take the theories about the disappearance of a nation, language and culture off the table. We also know that the number of people who speak Estonian as their native language is about to go into decline, at least in the generation to come. And we can never change the fact that one can only rely upon the Estonian language in Estonia.

This is the reason why we must focus on the protection, maintenance and development of the Estonian language with persistence and at a national level. This sets us apart from many other languages and countries.

We have some more differences. The National Human Development Report, which was published in September, shows that people of other nations who speak a different mother tongue yet who are living in Estonia must learn the official language, Estonian, to achieve success in this environment.

Comparative information on Latvia and Lithuania showed that being a Latvian or Lithuanian in those countries is seen as the key to success there.

There is a great difference between whether success is brought by a language that can be learnt or by origin and nationality, which is difficult – if not impossible – to change. This is a credit to language. This is a credit to a country. This is solid evidence that we have got some things right, language policies included. This is evidence to show that Estonia is not an ethnostate.

My ladies and gentlemen.

Changing or denying a language for a career or better living standard – this is not new for Estonians. The external power that is forcing us to use some other language has disappeared; however, the open world offers success and benefits – in different languages – to both construction workers and researchers.

Those who wish to be well informed about everything that is happening in the global economy, politics or culture, inevitably have to turn to English, German or French. Whether we condemn or commend it, it is still a fact.

We have every reason to be proud of the Estonian school system and subsequent life experiences, which give Estonians quite good language skills, in both a global and European frame of reference. However, we must look at the other side of the coin – there is a possibility that Estonians will permanently switch over to some other language that is mastered impeccably.

I am not preaching of isolation here, which would be devastating for Estonia, but am only pointing out facts. Including the one that foreign languages are a must for achieving both professional success or in understanding the surrounding world as much as possible. The creation and maintenance of information space in the Estonian language will be complicated and expensive everywhere. But this does not mean that we should give up too easily.

We can fight these risk scenarios that endanger the future of the Estonian language with both strategic and tactical tools. It does not matter how bad and ‘market economy’ this sounds – the Estonian language must remain competitive.

Dear audience.

We must keep developing and reforming the Estonian language; it must be a suitable medium for writing poetry, newspapers and scientific articles. We need Estonian expressions to comprehend our surroundings and discuss the changing reality. We can only contribute to substantial discussions if we have exact words to describe new phenomena.

Of course, this will only be possible if Estonia has the will and information that is required to have such an informed discussion. Should we lack the information and will as well as the technical terms and definitions, any discussion will be cut short.

Or people will start exchanging ideas in some other language and this will also contribute to the possibility that people will start to talk and write about these things in this other language.

This is also one of the reasons that made me, together with the Institute of Estonian Language, invite people to take part in a competition for new words, called Sõnaus. I am definitely not the most objective judge myself, but the feedback that the competition has received has certainly exceeded our wildest expectations.

We can keep arguing about whether the suggested words were appropriate, good or bad; and we can debate about whether language needs to be reformed and standardised according to Aavik's talent or Veski's way or allow things to take their own course and acknowledge the language's natural development, without interfering, allowing it to follow the path of any developing organism.

But we definitely did reassure people during the competition for new words that those who speak and think in the Estonian language are concerned and worried about the future of our language. Concern and commitment are actually the pre-requisites for the eternal protection of our language and culture.

I gave a promise – to myself, above all – that I would not criticise the actions of the Estonian media while President. I would just be misunderstood and misinterpreted. However, today, in giving this presentation to language people, I am going to make an exception.

Our media constantly maintains the actual use of language, in sound, on paper and computer screens, in our ears and eyes.

I do not wish to generalise and be arbitrary, but I am still going to say that the Estonian language that is spoken by the media channels of Estonia, which boasts the largest number of readers and listeners, betrays both lack of awareness and disregard for the opportunities offered by the Estonian language, while also underestimating the reception capability of their audience.

I believe that foreign terms and definitions that are crudely translated or new words that are taken straight from some other languages will deteriorate the structure of our language and also, inevitably, the foundations of our culture; this will weaken the Estonian language while limiting the opportunities of a cultural language.

A weakened language will rock our cultural foundation stronger than a sign with a company name that is written in a foreign language and attached to a wall or a shop assistant in a food store who is unable to speak the official language.

My ladies and gentlemen.

Language, as we all know, is not just grammar and vocabulary. We can only discuss the future of Estonia, our people and language, if there are different and bold development scenarios, as well as available long-term strategic visions.

These days we are about to celebrate the 100th book published by Ilmamaa in the Story of Estonian Thought series. One hundred volumes of texts, mostly old, that were written and published in the last century. This is a feat of studying, maintaining and introducing our spiritual heritage.

But at that we should also ask – where are the stories of our current thoughts, collections and visions about the future of the Estonian republic, people and language? Where are today's texts and collections, which if read and known would give our people strength for this, highly improbable, half a century of our statehood being at risk or being lost altogether?

If we had those texts and discussed them, would this take us closer to an answer to the question: how can we ensure the vitality of the Estonian language and compliance with our constitution?

For this very purpose, I wish all of us – all of you – success and strength. Thank you.