

Dear fellow countrymen,

Estonia is all of us. Today and tonight is, as always on February 24, the time to be proud of and discuss our country in each home in Estonia and in this hall. It is the time to ask how our state is doing, and our society and each and every person.

Let us not consider Estonia's birthday just another ritual that involves official traditions like hoisting the national flag and the parade of the Defence Forces and listening to the President's words of admonition at the end of the day. Those who expect the President to conclusively condemn one or two things today will be disappointed. No, today we should more than usually want to think and understand what this country truly is and what life in Estonia truly is.

Is Estonia merely a place where people live, because they happened to be born here? Is it merely a place of business? Is it a stand-by temporary springboard for a future career? Or, perhaps, is it something more, something with a discernible – in the positive sense – manner of business and attitude towards life and others? Or simply a home?

Our questions often have an undertone of doubt about our own choices and about the state as well. In this winter of discontent we are suffering from rising uncertainty: what will become of us? Because the safe havens that we have tried to reach have proven to be exposed to storms as well.

What will become of us if the future of Europe is not certain or if we are bombarded by news of uncertainty from all directions? What will happen if the euro collapses? What will happen if the United States withdraws from Europe? What will happen if people move away from Estonia? What will become of life in the countryside if the number of people living there continues decreasing?

What will become of our life in Estonia?

I am concerned about our excessive negative criticism of the choices of our state and of our own choices. Being demanding towards the state, the policymakers and ourselves is entirely appropriate. It is indispensable and we should not back down an inch in this regard. But thereby we should be fair and reasonable.

Dear friends,

Let us start with Europe.

The future of the European Union is the common concern of 500 million people. Many have finally and quite miserably grasped the simple truth that living at the expense of loans or the future is not sustainable. What was once considered the future has become the present and the time to pay is at hand. The only problem is that there is nothing to pay with, because the promises of the future have devalued.

We feel unfairness where those who have acted responsibly and besides at least seem poorer, have to pay off even a portion of the debts of the irresponsible. But is the exhaustion of solidarity in Estonia's interests? It is easy to point a finger. Justified disappointment is sweet. But is it beneficial in the long term? Probably not.

Would we be somehow better off if we stood further away from the events in Europe? Hardly. Let us think of alternatives. Without the European Union we would not be in NATO today. Without NATO our security would not be as solid. Without the euro the recovery and adaptation of our economy would not have been as quick. We would not have as many investments, doubts about the survival of our national currency would be exponentially higher and interest rates would be different. Thus, the price that an ordinary housing loan client south of us pays is about a quarter higher than here, not to mention the business sector.

In essence, the European crisis is not a monetary system crisis. It is a crisis of states' monetary policy and the key to solving it lies in the problem states. Estonia's duty is to rigorously participate in establishing a system where similar crises cannot repeat. It is important that Estonia's voice be heard in this debate. Let us not forget that only four states in the euro area enjoy a credit rating higher than Estonia's. We offer reliability. We are an example of the fact that the European rules are fine: you will not get into trouble if you follow them.

Mutual trust, which has suffered immensely in the European Union due to the misuse of the trust by some Member States, must be restored. It must be restored throughout the European Union. In the event of failure, it is much more likely that, instead of the collapse of the entire community, it will gather around the states where mutual trust still exists. The uniting of Europe has not been against economic logic, but based on it. Therefore, I am convinced that the states that did not misuse trust will survive this long-lasting European crisis.

Estonia can exploit the current state of affairs in order to take an even stronger role in the European Union, for instance, in the field of IT. In all honesty, there are few states in Europe where the professionalism in such matters like Internet freedom or e-services is as high. We do not have to think that others are smarter than us in this field. Obviously, in order to amplify the voice of our professionals, we need to listen to them more carefully at home first.

Let us speak about security.

The European security map has changed a lot in 20 years. The United States is cutting its presence in Europe and the European states do not contribute to defence as much as before, but they do hope that the US will come to their aid, as has been the case in the last 70 years. Estonia's choice to fulfil the obligation to spend two percent of its GDP on national defence is one of the reasons why NATO continued to support the Baltic air-policing mission. This decision did not come as lightly as we would like to think.

Let us, with emphasis on here and today, think about our young women and men who serve on NATO's mission in Afghanistan and who have suffered heavy losses. And let us now think about NATO's principle to mutually protect its allies. NATO is indispensable for Estonia's security.

And now, let us talk about our home.

What will become of us if more and more people move away from Estonia? We have to understand that if the borders are open, people move. This is the inevitability of freedom, whether we perceive it or not. A modern free person does not accept servitude and we cannot

use force to keep people from leaving. The vulgar Marxist understanding, which reduces everything to pay, is not absolute.

I have repeatedly emphasised that our own attitude towards our fellow countrymen is not a smaller concern. We cannot get far by looking for and emphasising mistakes and by being jealous of and mean to others. The state is often not better either: the return of the people is hampered by the rigid attitude towards the problems of those who arrive or return, be it the continuance of children's studies, finding a vacancy in a nursery school or granting a residence permit to a spouse who is a foreigner. The system must adapt to the changed behaviour of the people, not try to adapt the people to the system.

Ladies and gentlemen,

What will become of life in Estonia outside big cities?

I am truly worried, because partly due to the well-meaning desire to do things in a rational, optimal and economical manner, we tend to forget that the state is moving away from the countryside. And it is the President's job to draw attention to the issue.

I will give you an example. Paide. In the heart of Estonia.

If a resident of Paide has some business with the Rescue Centre, Police Prefecture, Environmental Inspectorate, Circuit Prosecutor's Office, County Court or Tax and Customs Board, they must drive to Pärnu.

If they have some business with the Social Insurance Board, Pension Board, Environmental Board or Health Board, they have to go to Tallinn. But in matters relating to the Road Administration and service in the Defence Forces, the regional office is located in Jõhvi.

All this is a paradox, which refers to the fact that the authorities' desire to do things in a manner

that is the most rational for themselves somehow wipes out the state in the heart of the state. By the way, only the office of the Unemployment Insurance Fund has remained in Paide.

What are the people supposed to feel if the state is moving away from them? It is not a matter of changing the borders of rural municipalities or budget totals, but simply a matter of how we organise our state and whether we take our citizens into account. Moreover, if no administrative reform is carried out in a systematic and controlled manner, the inevitability of life will still carry it out and do it in an uncontrolled manner, thereby not focusing on the citizens, but on all sorts of departmental interests.

I will give you one more example. Recently, I received a letter from an entrepreneur of a county who was told that subscription to the power grid would cost the company nearly half a million euros seven kilometres from the high voltage line. This price is charged from a domestic entrepreneur by Eesti Energia, a state-owned company. This is a matter of discussion. What is the state's strategic interest, local business or the dividends from Eesti Energia? Are we going to declare that Estonia is ready in the framework of the existing retail network?

Dear people of Estonia,

This all leads to the question of why we need our own state.

Of course, it would be more rational, optimal and what not, if we did things in a way that did not cost too much. Perhaps it would be even less expensive not to run our country at all. We would have no need for embassies, the Defence Forces, the police, the rescue service, universities where the language of instruction is Estonian...

A kolkhoz is much less expensive than one's own farm. Not caring is much less expensive than being in charge. Textbooks written in Estonian are much more expensive than the textbooks of some major language. A decent road network covering the entire country is perhaps also not rational in economic terms. Our own state is expensive, it is more expensive than blending into a larger state, but we have known that all along. As we have known that the price of losing our state is many times and thousands of lives worse.

Estonia needs a serious and broad-based discussion over what we need our state for and whether everything related to independent statehood can be measured only through economic rationality.

Smaller means more expensive. But I truly believe that if this smaller is well kept, it is very dear to us. It is priceless. It is not wise to sell priceless things.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I suppose we all have become slightly nervous on the threshold of the fifth year of the global economic crisis. We seem to be losing our politeness or perhaps it seems that politeness is no longer useful, because we can do without it and more easily so. In a tough economy it often seems that someone is benefiting better and more than they should at the expense of others. Be it pay, work, EU funds, building permits and many other things. And the state is obligated to give everyone everything.

People loudly demand more funds for maintenance support, unemployment benefits, raising the pay of teachers, police officers and rescue workers, constructing cultural objects, and their demands are certainly justified.

We know that very many people have been killed or injured in traffic and that speed cameras on a couple of roads are no substitute for the abolished traffic police. We also know that we will not get enough new teachers, unless their pay is raised. We know that the number of people living in the countryside is decreasing and that a school will be closed somewhere. And still, we think that the only way out is that the state will give more money.

Indeed, there are many problems which I personally want the state to spend more money on in order to resolve them. But when trying to first resolve things that disturb us the most in our own household, we realise what we can afford. Can we understand that what the state can afford is our own money? No more.

About a third of the state budget is already spent on social protection, 12% on education, 13%

on healthcare. When looking for additional funds, national defence is often pointed at. But did you know that less than five percent of our state's budget is spent on national defence?

In comparison with an average European state, Estonia does not spend too much or too little on any field.

Where do we get more money?

If your home is cold, you will not take a blanket off your family member, so that you would be warm. Likewise, the problems of one field cannot be solved at the expense of another in a state.

But are those who claim that the state can overcome the lack of funds by borrowing from someone or by raising taxes right?

Looking at Southern Europe we see how the covering of social expenses using borrowed funds and shifting the payment of debts to the shoulders of future generations will end in collapse.

But those who borrowed money, established the 13th and 14th monthly pay or reduced the age of retirement almost under middle age in order to please the voters and be re-elected were very popular governments. A state cannot be led to its doom in the name of such popularity.

The tax burden is a matter of choice. The choice of the voter. Now, you should ask yourself, your parents and your neighbour whether you are prepared to pay higher taxes, along with everything that comes with such a decision. I cannot prescribe for you what the right choice is. Again, this is the voter's choice. But I will say that let us not blame the state for not having a magic wand with which to fulfil everyone's wishes using the existing funds.

And now to what is the most important.

Independence means standing on your own feet. Democracy means governing yourself. Let us notice the choices that life gives us in Estonia. The choices that are ours to make.

In order to come to a common understanding, we need to deliberate and discuss with various parties, behind a table and respecting other points of view, not fending them off or walking away.

Let us remember that ten years ago civic society did not play any significant role in shaping our legislation and life in general. But now we witness more and more situations where the Legislature or the Executive risks its own authority if it disregards the third sector. We have spoken about being involved for years and today the third sector wants to be involved and participate in responsibility. I find it nothing but a good sign for society, even if it feels inconvenient for someone that people care about how our laws are made and how they will eventually affect us.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Mutual respect is important.

The Romans said: Quod licet iovi, non licet bovi, which means "What is legitimate for Jupiter, is not legitimate for oxen." In today's democracy things are the other way around: what is legitimate for oxen, is not legitimate for Jupiter. This is the main difference between our state order and non-democratic regimes. More is demanded of people in elected, higher positions. We need to demand as well.

We know how inappropriate and insulting the public use of words often is. We know how inappropriate and insulting public statements often are and how cluttered the political verbal space is with viciousness and evil. I feel that society is taking over the viciousness and thoughtless bickering characteristic of anonymous online comments.

My friends, let us try to discuss things without calling names, insulting, ironising, berating. Let us discuss things in a businesslike manner. This goes for everyone. This goes for politicians,

officials, MPs, representatives of constitutional institutions as well as texts published in the media. Let us solve problems, not create new ones through insults and taking offence and through vituperation.

Let us control our emotions. Let us think about our choice of words. Let us follow the standard used by Immanuel Kant: "So act that your principle of action might safely be made a law for the whole world."

If there is less noise, we will hear the alarm bell better once it really starts tolling.

Ladies and gentlemen,

One alarm bell in Estonia, which tolls oddly quietly, is the understanding of ethics. Do we really think that freedom means that everything is permitted? Or does the indifference towards ethics come from the fact that we do not go to church much anymore? Some time ago one could read in the Akadeemia magazine that we somewhat believe in supernatural forces. But their moral code remains a mystery.

The understanding that until an act has been adjudicated by the court, the Supreme Court, at that, the act is permitted, has become regrettably broad. According to this understanding one should not evaluate unethical behaviour. Remember that the presumption of innocence means that a person is not convicted before a judgment has been made, but we have the right and the obligation to condemn unethical behaviour.

If we do not find our way around ethics without court judgments, life in Estonia will become very difficult. This is the highest level of malicious legalist ethics: someone is able to deceive someone using legal tricks and it is not condemned. Stolen correspondence in someone else's office, an MP's suspicious business, an attempt to illegally finance a political party – is it all permitted until a court judgment has been passed? And will you tell your child that everything in life is permitted as long as you come up clean in court?

Following the same logic we may reach the absurd, claiming that until a court has decided that

Estonia was occupied, we cannot speak of occupation. And what's even worse, until all the deporters have been convicted in court, the deportation cannot be morally evaluated? I rest my case.

Dear fellow countrymen,

Let us be honest with ourselves. In spite of the suffering from the economic recession, let us not forget the underlying values which serve as the foundations of a functioning and successful democracy. Citizens strongly and painfully perceive any disregards of these values and this is how it is supposed to be. Let us hold empathy, politeness and respect for the views of others in high esteem even if we disagree with those views.

We need every single person who resides in Estonia. None of us are excessive and no one must feel excessive. There are too few of us to be indifferent towards our fellow countrymen. Too few, to be mean.

No one must suffer because they live away from Tallinn, Tartu or Pärnu. But their opportunities must be just as good as everywhere in Estonia.

No one here must be ashamed that the language that they speak at home is not Estonian. I know what it is like to live as a member of another nation among the indigenous people and I have been proud of my parents and myself, respectful for the land where I live.

Estonia has done well as a country. But this is not enough. Estonia is doing really well only if our people are doing well.

Dear friend,

Today, you can keep looking at the future with the knowledge that it is we who can make life better in Estonia. We have not consumed our tomorrow. We have not reached a dead end by

chasing benefits. The number of choices in front of us is higher than ever. We have created, made and opened these possibilities ourselves.

I would like to quote Ilse Metsmaa's reply to my question about why it is good to live in Estonia: "Ours is a small country where everyone counts and is important. We are not anonymous here; the contributions of all of us can be noticed. I am important here, keeping it all."

This is our home.

Long live Estonia!