

Fellow countrymen,  
Ladies and gentlemen,  
Dear friends,

"The past is a foreign country." A British novel begins with these very words. In Estonia's case the sentence is not merely a metaphor, but a reality. The past truly is a foreign country for us, a different country; something that we left behind with its customs and manners a generation ago.

Yet in the minds of Estonians our past, a reality framed by stone barricades and barbed wire, is in the process of obtaining an increasingly metaphorical shape.

Just as with each passing decade memories of the so-called Pääts era, which everyone used to complain about, gradually became brighter, so with time the August days of 1991 are becoming events that in their historical nature we take for granted.

And the experience of regaining our state felt so natural that it is forcefully eroding the experience of life under foreign occupation.

We must become accustomed to the fact that when we speak about the present, comparing it with the past becomes less relevant. And in many ways this is good and right. Because for how long can we remain depressed about the past? It is easier to lead our lives when the past has gradually freed us from its oppressive shackles.

Even so, the rapid onset of amnesia is somewhat frightening. Especially since we know what complete forgetting can lead to. We want to be like countries that are much richer than we are. So we no longer compare ourselves to the situation we were in twenty years ago, although it would be worthwhile to do so and we should in order to stay in touch with reality.

We want to be as rich as Finland or Switzerland. And as we are not – not yet, at least – then

someone has to take the blame for it. And in accordance with today's custom, it must be our own state.

A generation is enough to cardinally change the minds of a people.

Things have gone just as they did in the thirties, when the talented and hopeful youth of the day turned their resentment towards the Pääts regime against the Estonian Republic.

Many believe the solution lies in leaving, in earning money in a foreign country and finding happiness there. That too is a freedom we won back twenty-one years ago. To stay or go to accomplish something and earn money. But it was the same state that we are wont to criticize that brought us free access to Europe.

A harsh phenomenon that often accompanies these free choices is that once on our way, we suddenly find ourselves lonely in a foreign country among strange people.

Searching for one's reflection in the West's mirror might also be expressed through understanding life in a foreign country and reading its papers. It then becomes clear that over the past twenty years the best decisions have not always been made in our common Europe.

We can draw a conclusion or two based on that. Among them that all people involved in politics are fools. Or that Estonia has actually done many things right and quite well.

Or we could draw the principle conclusion: while for us and for Estonia the best years still lie ahead, this may not be the case for the vast majority of Europe. And each person who wants to leave should consider whether he wants to be part of the past or the future.

Ladies and gentlemen,

What worries me most on the eve of beginning the 22nd year of Estonia's restored independence is the disappointment and provocation going on in politics and democratic governance. In the foreign country of the past we were oppressed by the knowledge that we were powerless to decide anything on our own.

Being able to make our own decisions is exactly why we wanted our independent state back.

The past, nonetheless, vigorously continues to live on close by us. There in that foreign country, our separation from which we celebrate today. Show trials and witch-hunts for alleged terrorists, political opponents or protesters against authoritarianism, persecution of the free press in all those countries classified as not free or partly free by Freedom House demonstrate how different, how exceptional our way, the Estonian way, has been.

Despite recent comically-sounding hysterical cries, our political power stands separate from law enforcement. Estonian courts do not wait for the government to make up its mind on what a court decision should be. In Estonia the state is separate from the church and the church from the state. The state does not brand sportsmen who did not win a medal at the Olympics and their coaches as failures.

Estonia has not deceived anyone. Over the past twenty years Estonia has been the way we have chosen Estonia to be.

Dear fellow citizens,

In opting to join the European Union nine years ago we chose freedom. In addition to our constitutional freedoms we chose the freedom to travel, work, and trade anywhere in Europe.

Estonia has benefitted a lot from EU membership; that includes financially. We have all travelled on roads, let grain run through our hands, and admired brand-new roofs on school buildings while reading signs with large letters saying: "Built with the help of the European Union."

Without a doubt we have received a lot from Europe. And more important than money is the sense of freedom and security that we are still capable of recognizing.

But are we just as generous in giving? Believe me, the mechanisms of European fiscal stability would have come into being even without Estonian participation. There's no question about that.

The question is: do we want to be part of the solution? Do we with our experiences and knowledge have anything to contribute to shaping Europe as it happens every day, every hour? In brief, are we Europeans?

This is expressed by our capability and will to take others into consideration, to understand their worries. I have already thanked the Supreme Court of Estonia for the most thorough constitutional oversight in twenty years in the process concerning the European Stability Mechanism.

The process came to the conclusion that the framework of the constitution that has served us well already for twenty years permits the ESM treaty to be ratified and Estonia to join the solidarity of the whole eurozone.

And let us not forget that Europe is largely an intellectual project aimed at reinforcing democracy on a continent whose experience with it has been volatile. The story of European unity is a success story despite the circumstances, rather than because of them. There still are numerous cultural, national, historical and political powers that aim to draw Europe apart rather than together.

It is cheap and dangerous to let oneself be dragged along by them, even if it's only intellectually. As a result of this, we can end up tearing ourselves to pieces. Let us not do so.

However, dear friends, I call upon you all, politicians, NGOs, our cultural elite, each citizen, to boldly express your thoughts on whatever topic comes to mind.

Because when we are silent and do not speak out, if we complain on our own or anonymously, then our state, jointly restored and built, can become a foreign country. Something distant; an uninteresting phenomenon.

And it is highly doubtful that this behavior would bring Finland or Switzerland to us, the whiners, on a silver platter. Most likely we would get something else, something much closer and more familiar from the past.

Let us prevent this from happening. Let us retain our past knowledge and experiences. Let us maintain the joy that overwhelmed us when today, twenty-two years ago, we stood on the threshold of restored freedom, our independence, our regained state. May this emotion that we share, and that in many of us will live on until our death, help us overcome difficulties and disappointments.

I wish you a happy celebration of Estonia's restored independence. Long live Estonia!