

Dear Finno-Ugric brothers and sisters,  
Dear participants,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and a great honor to once again address the participants of the Finno-Ugric World Congress.

Here we think about our languages and culture, which have grown through the centuries like a tree that has many branches, yet one trunk and the same roots.

Compared to our last gathering in Siberia in the summer of 2008 the economic reality surrounding us and the whole world has changed profoundly. Four years ago only scientists and pessimistic financial analysts might have predicted the approaching economic and financial crisis. By now, we, as states and peoples, know it all too well.

It would be completely wrong to claim that our peoples' language and cultural policies could have been left unaffected by the financial upheaval. Moreover, when the economic situation is miserable, when unemployment increases and tax money decreases, more often than not it is the cultural sphere that not only gets hit first, but sometimes hardest.

It's not difficult to see why. Sometimes both the political cycle of democratic states or the egoistic aims of totalitarian rulers force decision-makers to favor short-term gains over long-term ones, at the same time completely forgetting that being a homo economicus is only one part of culture and of being human.

On the other hand, it is relatively easy for decision-makers to sacrifice the fruits of cultural life. However, extensive historical experience of the world's peoples proves the tenacity and resilience of culture. This applies just as well to our Finno-Ugric branches.

Each one of us can probably think of a significant example of how a dream we had four years ago has not materialized due to the difficult times we're currently experiencing.

Today, the home of our Estonian culture, the Estonian National Museum, is more than a hundred years old. For various reasons, mostly political, but also economic, the museum has never had a real home. I mean one built to be a museum, for the collection, study, preservation and displaying of our priceless cultural heritage.

The Estonian people wanted to build it. Only five years ago all seemed to be settled. The decision had been made. One of the projects had won the architectural competition. Even money no longer appeared to be a question.

But then along came the crisis. The decision, determination and project were no longer enough. Budget resources were channeled to solve the day's urgent problems, which from a short-term perspective always appear much more important than the intellectual culture and artifacts our ancestors had created.

While arguing over the money applied for from the EU, and when making the final decision, it was primarily the economic arguments that prevailed. Questions were asked, but because the answers were apparently not good enough doubts remained whether it would be worth it and whether there would be enough visitors.

The Estonian people have not given up hope that in the end we will build this museum, a vital organ and institution of our culture. We know that in the long term it is precisely these kinds of buildings that lay the foundation for the preservation and development of our culture and language, a foundation that we can stand on today and tomorrow.

I will not deny that with each building there must be calculations and a plan for how to maintain it in the future. But I believe that if we do not build this museum we will suffer much greater loss in the decades to come.

Ladies and gentlemen,

With this introduction I would, among other things, like to say that in economically difficult times, not to mention an increasingly globalized world, it is very easy to categorize things as important and less important, large and small. Easy to pass judgment on something that has a meaning in the distant future. Especially an economic meaning.

Dear friends, on a global scale it is not meant for Finno-Ugric peoples, languages or cultures to become quantifiably large. In a narrowly financial sense it is not worth preserving and developing them. It would make economic sense to adopt English, Chinese, Spanish or even Russian.

The Estonian people have been faced with this many times. We know what it means and what it costs. This path does not suit us, nor does it suit any other small nation, culture or state. It's a road to perdition, a way that leads to the end of a people, state and culture.

According to free market principles Hungarians and Finns are just as useless as Estonians and Khanty-Mansis. We are too small and our markets too distant from global financial centers.

Thankfully, the democratic part of the world understood a long time ago that money is not the only measure of wealth. The principle of national self-determination, approved by the international community, has secured the independence of many small nations, among them Hungary, Finland and Estonia. In the same way it is accepted that different languages, religions, cultures and habits are a source of peace and wellbeing, not hindrances to development.

Their preservation and development is dealt with in the framework of language, cultural and various minority policies both at the national and international level.

It is in our interests, as with all Finno-Ugric peoples, that such an attitude continues and intensifies. In order that our distinctiveness and uniqueness may not fall into the clutches of markets solely in search of economic arguments.

Money, an enterprising spirit, and productive work will not go anywhere. Yet in difficult times, hurried and farfetched decisions resulting in reduced contributions to the linguistic and cultural domains can have destructive consequences for our peoples' future.

In difficult times – and let it be said that this is not a time of spiritual or material collapse, but rather one of fixing our own mistakes – we often speak about scarce resources and that something or someone should be sacrificed.

Of course, as a species, humankind is not almighty, but if we at all talk about giving something up it should have a strong, theoretical and scientific basis.

Peoples and cultures can look to natural sciences for examples. It has always been less dangerous to consider the relations between species than those between nations. Today's natural and environmental protection is capable of rationally admitting that it is beyond our means to preserve all species in perfect health and in precisely the same conditions and environments as before.

Accordingly, difficult and unpleasant decisions are often required to protect and assist different species. In the conservation of nature there are a number of approaches that compete with and complete each other. They help ensure the best use of resources.

These principles also help us speak about ourselves, our cultures. It means setting what it means to be Finno-Ugric within a broader, global perspective or ecosystem, and not remaining only among our own kind.

Firstly, there's function-based protection. This means that the first priority is to protect species that have a crucial role to play in the existence of others, for example as part of the food chain. This, for instance, goes for the whitebark pine, the pinecones of which form a strategic part of the grizzly bears' food chain.

Secondly, there's evolution-based protection according to which protection is prioritized based on how much added value a species provides genetically. The rarer and the more obscure the

species is, for instance the Chinese giant salamander, the more important its genome. Translated into the language of culture, it would mean protecting and assisting those most alien to the mainstream, those who survive with ease. This would mean protecting those most like us.

The third and equally efficient means of protection looks at the ecosystem. The likelihood of a species' survival grows significantly when its surrounding environment is kept stable, even by force. This gives it the possibility to adapt to changes more peacefully.

For cultures, this means that mere cultural autonomy may not be enough. The legal right to practice one's culture is not enough if the surrounding environment, from which the culture has received its strength and in which it has its roots, is quickly or unrecognizably changed. This tragic picture is a familiar one, from the world's oil and gas fields to illegal logging sites in forests.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As we can see, it is quite simple to import the principles suitable for the protection of nature and all kinds of species to the cultural sphere. Without wanting to repeat simple truths about how diversity is enriching, I would like to look briefly at Estonia's neighboring culture, or neighboring branch, the Livs.

Around a thousand kilometers from here, in Mazirbe where the sandy beaches of Latvia pour into the Gulf of Riga, is the Livs' national house, finished in 1939 in co-operation between Finland, Hungary, Estonia and Latvia. This white house is still a cultural hearth for the Livs who, according to popular opinion, have already become extinct. It symbolizes, on the one hand, that larger neighbors do recognize the needs of smaller cultures and languages, and, on the other hand, it also proves the vitality of small peoples.

Here, I can mention a significant example that quite literally occurred yesterday when I received the new Livonian-Estonian-Latvian dictionary fresh off the printing press. This was made possible by co-operation between, and co-financing from, two countries – Estonia and Latvia –, but naturally under the supervision of the Livs themselves.

The publishing of this dictionary could just as well have been postponed in expectation of a fairer economic climate. It is no secret that both the Estonian and particularly the Latvian economy were especially hard hit during the global crisis.

The previous Livonian dictionary was published almost seventy-five years ago; the new one just in time for the Finno-Ugric Congress thanks to the co-financing of the Latvian government. Latvia, despite its austerity budget, deemed it necessary to support the publication of so far the largest and most complete dictionary of its small indigenous people.

It is free and democratic societies that consider it necessary and are brave enough to support projects that are essentially important for the preservation of cultures. This means projects important in substance not form. In Estonia we know this all too well from our own past, but so do Livs, Latvians and other peoples.

We were forced to live in a state where the national culture had to be "socialist in substance, national in form," which in reality meant dull and stereotypical, without any true national substance. We were able to confront this ideological coercion with our own strength and wisdom, for when there is no substance, then in the end there's no form. Without substance nothing is sustainable.

It is free and democratic states that can peacefully deal with their past, unafraid to publish even those facts that are embarrassing and for which there should be an apology. We are not afraid of books that describe crimes committed against Finno-Ugric peoples. We do not remove them from our bookshelves. We read them, we learn to avoid the same mistakes in the future, and, if possible, we try to make up for these mistakes.

With all this in mind, it is our duty – we whose people and culture are blessed with the opportunity to live and prosper in our own free and democratic states – to stand for freedom and democracy, in order that the languages and cultures of our kindred people and of all small nations may continue.

In pursuing this goal, I hope the Finno-Ugric Congress has substantial discussions and makes wise decisions. I thank you.