

Dear friends, dear creators, especially those of you who were here 25 years ago,

The creative unions plenum 25 years ago was, as I have described, the event that made me realise that the 35 years of my life I had lived until then were truly over. To be more precise, it was the arrival of the April 7 issue of the cultural newspaper *Sirp ja Vasar* in Munich 11 days later. I read it and gasped – I couldn't believe what I saw there. I went home and told my wife – pushing, in a pram, my 6-month-old son, who has now been living here for quite a few years – that I didn't know when exactly, but Estonia would be free and I would move there.

Who wouldn't have been excited to hear that the country's finest artists, scholars and intellectuals – in a word, the spirit of the nation – were telling the truth to the stupid old ox otherwise known as the Soviet regime? And furthermore: after 2500 years was Plato's Republic really about to be born, led by lovers of wisdom, philosophers? That was the way it seemed.

Everything that followed fuelled our hopes: removal of the local CPSU satraps, the despised party secretaries; the voluntary mass mobilisation of the people's heritage protection movement, the Popular Front and Citizens Committees, and the Congress of Estonia that grew out of these; the gradual lift of the prohibition on telling the truth about history, and the disappearance of censorship on the whole. And then the Republic of Estonia was born again, largely on the initiative of those who spoke at the creative unions plenum.

When people have been looking forward to something for over fifty years, where there are a million or more hopes bound together, then the more specific each of these hopes is, the more likely it is that these hopes will end in disappointment. Reality is never as great as we imagine.

The creative unions plenum was the first truly public political discussion held in Estonia for several decades – political in the way it is understood by democracies. And we all thought that this would be the face of the Republic of Estonia: an open agora or forum, a meeting point for philosophers-turned-leaders who would look out for Estonia's interests.

However, governing a state is another matter altogether, as we discovered: too often it is nothing more than the administration of things, to paraphrase Saint-Simon. A poet who writes laws has to forget about metaphors and ambiguity, because laws cannot be open to a multitude of interpretations. A composer who becomes a minister must tolerate cacophony and a total lack of harmony, because democratic debate is anything but harmonious or symphonic.

Then there's everything else that is so often associated with a functioning democracy: political parties and their tricks; dry laws that are not lyrical at all; dull (if not strict) fiscal policy. In other words, politics becoming professional.

Philosophers and creators who don't want to become professional politicians retreat. Some, to quote a politician, "go back to what they know"; others begin to think that the ox, that stupid old power, is skewering the spirit, as Betti Alver put it during the Pääts era. Some even think that barring people's freedom to whinge about everything, life in Estonia was better during the Soviet era than it is now.

Plato's Republic with its wisdom-loving leaders has never existed in reality. True creative forces have always had a role to play as members of the opposition. After all, how could an artist ever accept the status quo? If at some point the existing condition is found to be sufficient, there is no need for anything new or different.

This, in my opinion, leads to a challenge for artists who are free of totalitarianism and at liberty.

Paul Eerik Rummo wrote 51 years ago:

Sass! Let's steal a boat and go sailing.

So many meanings; memories of childhood games, such defiance, and the anti-state suggestion that stealing a ship is the only way to get out of here.

15 years ago, at a time when we could already visit our northern neighbours without a visa, he might have written something completely different: Sass! Let's buy ferry tickets and go to Finland . Not particularly romantic, anti-state or defiant; more like a good advertisement for Tallink. Or it might have highlighted our emigration problem.

Because Estonians have always drawn on their culture and cultural intelligentsia more than on politicians, the opposition's role is perhaps more important here than it is elsewhere. One of the reasons for this is that our creators feel our pain better than anyone else. Be it Carl Robert Jakobson, Juhan Liiv or Gustav Suits before our independence; Heiti Talvik, Betti Alver and August Sang during the Pääts era; or the majority of creators during the occupation, as proven by the creative unions plenum. Those who were loyal to the authorities – Ado Grenzstein to the tsar; August Mälik to Pääts; not to mention those who pledged their loyalty to the occupiers – never really won over the people.

This means that a creative person in opposition is almost a tautology. And in a situation where all of the existing parties have at some point been the opposition, such a person is much sharper in opposition than our parties. And therefore essential.

But there are also other ways of showing your social pain, your social nerve. Siiri Sisask is helping the underprivileged in Rapla through her charity 'Let There Be Light'. Kaur Kender is asking whether the funds used to finance culture should come from alcohol excise – a source based on people damaging their health. The more they do so, the better the situation for Estonian culture.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the creative unions plenum – which, unlike the occupying powers, really was the honour, mind and conscience of the people. It showed us where to go and took us there. I hope that future generations will never forget what their predecessors did and what their own calling is in life.