



AUSTRALIA EESTI SELTSIDE LIIT

COUNCIL OF ESTONIAN SOCIETIES IN AUSTRALIA

Dear Estonians in Australia,

In the 20th century, Estonia was a sovereign state from 1919 to 1940. From there after, Estonia suffered under the military occupation for 50 years until the independence was regained in 1991. Regaining independence was a complicated time and process in history.

By the 1980s, not many people believed that Estonia would become an independent country ever again.

Towards the end of 1980s, the internal crises in the Soviet Union, both economic and political stagnation was dragging the huge country towards an abyss.

Gorbachev came to power in 1985, when the emporium had reached to stage, where the reforms were inescapable.

Gorbachev came with ideas of *perestroika* (restructuring), *uskorenie* (acceleration) and *glasnost* (openness), and Estonia played along. Even the Western leaders saw Gorbachev as a miracle man who would reshape the Soviet Union and achieve developed socialism, but the stagnated system could not have been patched up with cosmetic reforms, that allow some profitable activities under government control and not deal with the rotten system.

Soviet Union was on a shaky ground and extremely weak both regionally and globally, its impact continued to be diminishing.

The loosening grasp of the empire provided an opportunity. Estonia started to emerge from the ruins of the empire. This new situation was put to test by demonstrations in 1987. Explosive 1988 Singing Revolution showed that the dream of Free Estonia was never really dead. The intent to establish a sovereign nation was declared in Estonia in 1988, and by the end of 1988, the drive to independence was not possible to be stopped.

Big public manifestations were held against Soviet Rule including the significant 'The Baltic Way' on 23rd August 1989. Approximately two million people joined their hands and formed a human chain to connect the three Baltic capitals – Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn.

These events caused firstly wide-ranged negotiations and concluded in the violent attempts of Soviet Union to stop the processes in Baltic States. Yeltsin was under house arrest in the Crimea, coup organisers were running the Kremlin and the Red army looked poised for another crackdown on the Baltic nations. Estonia foiled a 3 day attempt by Soviet paramilitary groups to take over the country. The 76th Guards Air Assault Division arrived in Tallinn from Pskov, they were met by volunteers who had responded to a call to take up the defence of Toompea Hill as well as the city's radio and television buildings. This dedication and victory of people is celebrated on August 20 every year. Estonians declared the full independence on 21st August 1991.

On 6th September 1991, the Soviet Government recognized the independence of all three Baltic states. Estonia started to rebuild both itself and its diplomatic relations in the early 1990s, while Russian troops remained in the country for another three years — stark evidence of the reestablishment of Estonian independence not being a clean break following decades of occupation. Complete withdrawal of Russian troops from all Baltic States occurred in Estonia on 31 August 1994.

Estonia applied for EU membership two months later, on Nov. 24, 1995, and after nearly a decade of negotiations was finally acceded to the EU on May 1, 2004. On March 29 of that same year, Estonia also joined NATO.

Dear fellow Estonians,

The Second World War ended for Estonia on 21st of August 1991, thirty years ago.

Estonia still had some post-Soviet leaders and authorities that were East-oriented or favoured a neutral position between the East and West. But Estonia managed to turn its society decisively towards the West very fast.

It is a miracle the way Estonia managed to build European country in such short time. It is our past that was the key for Estonia stepping into the future. We are Europeans – this is our historic and cultural identity – Estonia naturally belongs to Europe.

Dear Estonians in Australia,

We raise our flags today and celebrate Estonia. We are so happy and proud of our people and of our country.

We remember all who have fought for Estonia. I think of my father, who was protecting Toompea at the 1991 events, and said to me – ‘Come what may, there is no way back any more’.

I think of my father’s father, who fled to Sweden after his fight for Estonia was over.

This is the thing. Estonia’s geopolitical position has not changed.

If we learned anything from the events 30 years ago, we see that Estonia’s independence is unthinkable without economically and militarily powerful democratic Allies. Membership in NATO and the European Union was an inevitable security policy choice. Estonia and its NATO Allies do their best to deter Russia and prevent war.

Estonia always will have to feel the eastern neighbour’s pulse. Estonians must permanently follow and understand the developments in Russia. The threats have not faded away and will not disappear for an indefinite time.

On behalf of AESL, Sirje Jogi

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