

## *Defending our freedoms – the role of knowledge*

Honourable Rector [Toomas Asser],

Excellences, professors, ladies and gentlemen!

Tartu is my last stop in Estonia during the state visit, but by no means the last in importance. I am honoured to speak at the University of Tartu, a historic cultural and educational centre of the region, that has always been a special place for Latvians. It is a home, an incubator of the first Latvian national awakening. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the *New Latvians* [or *jaunlatvieši*] movement formed at the University of *Tērbata* [as we called Tartu in Latvian at that time].

The most important thing is that, no matter what the states or regimes, Latvians always came and will come to Tartu to acquire the best education, the same way as Estonians have been visiting Riga since the nineteenth century, in order to attend the *Riga Polytechnicum*. They continue doing it today in search for knowledge and academic excellence in Latvian institutions of higher education.

Today I would like to say a few words on knowledge, freedom, and technologies – three issues that, in my view, are related to each other.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the national awakening of Latvians and Estonians, the destiny of our nations became closely linked through studying and teaching here, at the Tartu University. In Tartu, it was demonstrated that one who acquires knowledge, inevitably seeks freedom – as individual and as a nation.

So far, the lesson of history, but what is the relation between freedom and knowledge today in Latvia and Estonia? In my opinion, the relation is responsibility.

We are small nations in terms of population and territory. Our greatest resource is our people. There is no better investment in people than education. Never in the past we had so many opportunities to pursue knowledge as today. And it is our responsibility - both in government and education institutions - to provide access to comprehensive education, and much more – to create a knowledge society - a society where the urge to know more, to study and to grow is natural. In the same way, we are responsible for creation of environment that is beneficial for the development of science and the work of talented specialists.

Today, we recognize that knowledge is much more than only information. The cost of replicating information is almost zero, especially with modern technologies. Knowledge, on the other hand, primarily is a cognitive capacity, an expertise - it includes education, learning and competences.

Knowledge society refers to the society in which the creation, dissemination, and utilization of information, has become the most important factor of production. In such society, knowledge assets, also called intellectual capital, are the most powerful producer of wealth.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We tend to fear things, which we don't know and do not understand. Freedom means to live our lives according to our wishes and without creating threat to anyone else. This can be achieved by knowing yourself and your surroundings and having opportunities to pursue your goals in the field of education. Only by learning we can overcome our fear and prejudice. Only through knowledge we can become more self-assertive and responsible as individuals and as societies.

This brings me back to the question of freedom. Only educated society can maintain a strong state in a long term. And only well-informed society can build better and more inclusive society. Nor justice, nor democracy can last long without a proper education.

Knowledge is what makes small countries big. The economic expansion of the last two centuries has been based on the explosion of knowledge. Over the two last centuries we have learned a lot about what can be made, and how. Today, I see how our companies become global. I also see that many

talented individuals – musicians, artists, IT specialists - challenge the notion of small states on a daily basis. We are as big as our ideas are.

Common values and shared common goals allow us to make alliances – it's another way how to maximize efforts of the smaller countries. Close coordination between neighbours is always the first thing to do, when we need to provide our answers to many common challenges we are facing today. Let me express my gratitude for the excellent, trustful and pragmatic relations that exist between Latvia and Estonia. Thanks to Estonia for being the number one in our phone book when a call to a friend is needed!

I am also glad to note that close coordination and friendship within the Nordic-Baltic family has become a part of our daily life. Since the times of the old Hanseatic league, we cherish free trade, competition, openness and freedom. Today the old concept, based on common values, is becoming alive again – we see that the group of Nordic – Baltic countries, Ireland and the Netherlands, called *New Hansa*, becomes more and more visible in the discussion about the future of Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Most of the contemporary knowledge is very different from what was a cutting edge in the first years of *Academia Gustaviana*<sup>1</sup>. I am speaking about the new technologies and the new world they create every day. Technologies have a great power of bringing society together, and at the same time they can create new divides. Technologies form completely different and new challenges for both society and education.

And again, at the core of such challenges is the question of freedom. It is a freedom of access, empowerment and virtually borderless opportunities in the *World Wide Web* and even beyond – as the *Internet of Things* and the *Artificial Intelligence* enter our daily lives. Essentially, it is the freedom to a quality of life. Internet freedom has become one of the core human freedoms all over the world – the same as the freedom of speech and the freedom of assembling. We – Estonia, and also Latvia, have achieved a lot by applying innovative solutions in the public sector, becoming an example and a source of hope for many.

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<sup>1</sup> Tartu Universitāte 1632. gadā

Just one of the examples - yesterday, in conversation with my colleague Kersti, we discussed a new project - *Digital Via Baltica*. 30 years after the legendary human chain we develop another joint project – intelligent transport systems along the *Via Baltica* corridor, based on 5G technology.

Speaking about 5G and about other cutting-edge technologies, we must recognize that technologies and know-how are also the issues of national security. We have to admit that there always will be countries that do not pursue peaceful coexistence, and there will be companies, which do not care about our personal data, welfare and security.

Technologies create new vulnerabilities for society - from cyber bullying in schools and misuses of free speech, to cyberattacks and hybrid threats at the national level. The freedom must be protected against combined powers of political manipulation and search for more profit by some economic actors.

We are making fast steps towards the introduction of Internet of Things and wider use of Artificial Intelligence. Clearly, the Artificial Intelligence can greatly help us to manage large amounts of data and information. It can make our lives much easier, but there are risks as well. Artificial Intelligence shall develop, but only within a solid legal framework.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today one thing becomes very clear – we need more and more knowledge to maintain freedom in the technological world. Increase of our knowledge must be at least proportional to that of others. No one can achieve this alone. In this regard, I am most happy that this beautiful city also hosts the Baltic Defence Academy. This is an excellent example of shared efforts for our common goals.

At present, our nations are connected through countless partnerships between our students, artists, politicians, business people, athletes, and many, many others. But I am sure that we can do even more together – through shared efforts of our countries and more personal connections as well.

Latvia will never be alone, while we have Estonia as our neighbour and *vice versa*. In this free world our countries take a firm stance for others and first of all, for each other.