

**Eiki Nestor's Speech at the Meeting of the PACE Standing Committee in Tallinn  
27 May 2016**

President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,

Minister of Foreign Affairs,

Dear colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to Estonia, welcome to Tallinn! I am delighted to greet you here at the Riigikogu. I feel like at home here, I have been a member of the Estonian parliament since 1992 and consider myself a Dinosaur of the Riigikogu. In the end of the 1990s, I was a member of the Estonian delegation to the PACE, so I am one of you.

Holding the Presidency of the Committee of Ministers is a great honour for us, especially considering the important role that the Council of Europe has played in Estonia's development over the past 25 years. The Soviet occupation in Estonia ended in 1991, and after regaining our independence, joining the Council of Europe and its Parliamentary Assembly was one of the first goals for us. It was achieved in 1993, when Estonia became a part of the family of peaceful countries whose aim was to work towards a stable international system and world order based on the rule of law.

In terms of foreign policy, Estonia's choices in the 1990s and afterwards have been rather simple – we are part of Europe and the Western world, and we knew that in order to be successful as a nation and a country, we had to integrate, then integrate, and then integrate again.

Having become a member of several significant international organizations, Estonia joined the EU and NATO in 2004. Integration is important for us in terms of our national security, it makes sense politically and economically, but it also helps advance the values we share and provides an important societal and cultural connection. After all, it was already in the year of 1905 – during the time when the European integration process had not even started – when a renowned Estonian poet Gustav Suits proclaimed: “Let us remain Estonians, but let us become Europeans, too!”

Today it has become a reality. We are Estonians, but we are Europeans as well. We are not only grateful for the tremendous help that the international organizations and institutions, as well as our friends in Europe, have given us in building up the strong democracy we are today, but we are also committed to contribute to strengthening these institutions and organizations further, and helping build Europe that is ever stronger and more united.

The period of the past 25 years has by no means been an easy one for the Estonians, but we have been fortunate to enjoy many successes. However, “Europe whole and free and at peace” is still not a reality but rather a goal to work towards. Let’s take the situation in Ukraine. Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians gathered on Maidan just two years ago to support Ukraine’s decision to join the family of peaceful European countries. The people wanted their country to become more democratic, more open, one where personal freedoms would be upheld and free and fair institutions would be the norm.

The Ukrainian civil society proved its resilience and demonstrated the power of the democratic ideas they believe in, and as senseless as it sounds, Russia, Ukraine’s neighbour to the East, saw it as a threat to its country. Russia’s invasion into Ukraine violated every principle we believe in, and it is our duty to make it known that no country should ever pay for its European choice with human lives.

As many of you have already heard, just two days ago, Nadya Savchenko, a Ukrainian air-force pilot who was captured in June 2014 and sentenced 22 years in a Russian jail, was released and is now back home in Ukraine. PACE was one of the organizations persistently demanding her release, so I want to thank you for your help in making this possible.

What I see as one of the most important factors with regard to the war in Ukraine is the opposition between open and closed views of the world. European values, our belief in open society and tolerance, are – by their nature – in conflict with the ideas that the authoritarian regimes are guided by.

The open world is democratic and tolerant, it respects people and their freedoms, it acknowledges both victories and losses. In the closed world, there are only victories, and these victories are used to make people believe that those who are different are the enemies. In this regard, autocratic regimes have a lot in common with xenophobes and radical nationalists, who oppose themselves to the open and tolerant world and perceive it as their enemy.

While spreading fear and hatred is relatively easy, creating a society that functions on the principles of tolerance and mutual respect is difficult. In Estonia, we know all too well that the collapse of a repressive regime does not in itself result in an open society. Moving in this direction requires long-term commitment to upholding personal freedoms and building representative and accountable institutions.

Having not just lived through, but actively taken part in Estonia’s societal transformation, I know the hardships, the amount of work and persistence that profound changes take – not only from the politicians but from the whole society.

As one of the present-day leading countries in personal freedoms and transparency, good business environment and a vibrant civil society, Estonia can be the proof that setting high goals and being persistent can bring superior results. I hope that our success can inspire countries who are undergoing similar transformations right now, and we are happy to share our experience with them.

Despite various successes, Estonia's transition from a closed and prejudiced to an open and inclusive society has been far from perfect. There is still a considerable amount of mistrust and intolerance in the Estonian society, and the current refugee crisis has brought these sentiments to the surface. As everywhere in Europe, most of these fears are founded on insecurity and fear of the unknown.

We have made mistakes, we have had tough conversations and we have gone through difficult times, and it is a normal part of the democratic process. As we know, the authoritarian regimes never make mistakes, but the model of democratic and open society does not rule out making mistakes.

One area in which we surely have room for improvement is gender equality and the rights of children. These are the issues that need urgent attention in Estonia, and partly for this reason, we have chosen them as the priorities of our presidency.

I am happy to announce that the Estonian Parliament is committed to ratify the Lanzarote Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse in this very room during our presidency. The Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women will also be ratified in the next few years.

The second set of the priorities of our presidency has to do with a topic that is less tangible, but undoubtedly important as well – Human Rights and the Rule of Law in the internet.

Dear colleagues, we are living at a time when the world is increasingly interconnected and domestic and foreign issues are difficult to tell apart. While Estonia is geographically quite far from the current main migratory routes of refugees, as well as the strongholds of ISIS or other radical networks, we are well aware that these issues impact us directly.

International terrorism is a problem that needs to be dealt with by all of us, and any workable solutions must be grounded in the values we share. When during the Cold War, political struggles were about the ability to control and convey information; today political struggles are about the creation and destruction of credibility. We need to be able not just to better communicate our message, but to create a dialogue and build trust. We cannot out-propagandise the networks of radicals and populists, what we must do is to provide access to truthful information and make a convincing case in support of open and tolerant societies.

When it comes to communication and trust-building, we as members of parliaments have a particularly important role. For one, we need to demonstrate our awareness of – and comfort with – the realities of the interconnected and culturally diverse world. Let's do all we can to involve people into substantive discussions so that they could become more aware, more open, and perhaps over time revise some of their pre-existing assumptions. Merely a political agreement on how to solve a major international problem is not enough, workable solutions need to involve the whole society.

As members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, you are shaping the future of Europe in a very direct way. PACE has been – and needs to continue to be – at the forefront of generating workable solutions and holding dialogue with governments, international organizations, and people around Europe.

In Estonia, we are convinced that that we can be successful only when Europe is successful. It makes sense economically and politically, but I believe that first and foremost, it is our shared values, respect for democracy, human rights, personal freedoms, openness and tolerance, that bind us together.

I want to quickly turn back to the topic of the internet, e-solutions and e-government, because this is what Estonia is perhaps the most well known for. Internet is essential in fostering the exchange of ideas and perspectives, connecting different people and building networks, but – even here in e-Estonia – it will never replace human contact. For that reason, I am particularly happy that you are here today not virtually but physically.

Dear colleagues, in addressing other people in everyday life, we tend to be quite formal and polite. However, with our closest friends, the communication is much more relaxed, and we often use nicknames. It works well with people, and there is nothing too special about it, but in some rare cases, it can also work with the names of cities. So, Estonians take the ferry not to go to Stockholm, but to Stock; and in the same way, the Estonian politicians and diplomats go to Strass, rather than Strasbourg.

Dear friends, I hope you enjoy your stay in Tallinn, I wish you fruitful discussions and much success in the important work that you do.

Thank you very much.