

Speech by Mr Eiki Nestor, President of the Riigikogu
at the **Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments**
Tallinn, 23 April 2018

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Honorable Guests,
Dear Colleagues,

I am very happy to greet you all here in Tallinn. Over the past ten months, I have had the pleasure to meet with many different delegations from your parliaments, and I could not think of a better way to conclude the Estonian Presidency of the Council of the EU than by having all of you here.

Estonia's Independence

Dear friends,

You are in a country that *gained* its independence one hundred years ago. It was possible thanks to the strong wish to become a free, democratic, and independent country. But it was also possible because the (Russian) Empire was mired in a fight for power, and had lost its ability to wield sufficient control over its expropriated peripheries.

You are in a country that *lost* its independence in the run-up to World War II when all the European countries tried to solve their problems by themselves and became isolated. Two big countries made a deal, and our independence evaporated.

You are in a country that *regained* its independence twenty six years ago. It was possible thanks to the strong wish to once again become a free, democratic, and independent country. But it was also possible because of the inherent weaknesses of the Soviet regime, and its increasing inability to wield control over its peripheral parts that had been unlawfully annexed.

The EU and NATO

I am telling you this because these lessons that we learned the hard way, are crucial in understanding how we see the world from a small country like Estonia. After regaining our independence in 1991, we never had any doubt as to whether or not we should integrate with the free and democratic countries of the West.

It was crucial that the countries that appreciated freedom and democracy had learned from their mistakes, and had created organizations such as the European Union and NATO. We knew that in order to survive and prosper, we had to integrate, then integrate, and integrate again. It is not an overstatement but a simple fact that integration with our friends and allies is Estonia's life insurance policy.

Benefits of the EU

Going beyond the fundamentals of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law, I want to give you some figures to illustrate the growth that Estonia's economy has experienced since we became a member of the EU. In 2005, a year after our accession, Estonia's GDP per capita was a little more than 7,100 euros. At that time, this was 60 percent of the EU average. 12 years later, in 2017, Estonia's GDP per capita was more than 17,400 euros, about 75 percent of the EU average.

For the average Estonian worker, the gross monthly salary in 2004 was 516 euros. By 2018, it has more than doubled, currently reaching 1,221 euros per month. There is no question that the EU taxpayers have had a role in helping us to get where we are. However, it is important to realize that by doing this, the EU taxpayers have also helped themselves. That is how being a part of the world's biggest single market works: we are all better off if we work together.

Free movement of people

In the context of the free movement of people, it is natural that many Estonians have found new opportunities in other EU countries. Studying, working, and travelling abroad enriches the lives of our people and benefits our societies as a whole. Right after we joined the EU, it was perhaps normal that more people left Estonia than came here. In this regard, the year of 2015 was a turning point. Since then, every year more people have come to Estonia than have left the country. If Estonia was not a member of the European Union, I am sure many more people would have left, and the number of returnees would be close to zero.

e-Estonia

Dear Colleagues,

It is only in a stable international environment with strong and sturdy international organizations, that all countries – big and small – can grow, develop, and innovate. In the 1990s, not many Estonian people dreamed of becoming Europe's leading nation in digital services and e-government. However, there were many people who understood that Estonia should not waste its precious human and financial resources on creating a large public sector. Luckily for us, there were some people who tirelessly encouraged politicians and the society to invest in and start using digital solutions to make the public sector more efficient, simple, and affordable.

Today, Estonia is considered to be one of the most advanced digital societies in the world. Internet voting in both local and general elections is possible since 2005. 95 percent of all tax declarations in Estonia are filed electronically – the whole process takes approximately 2 minutes. In my work as the Speaker of the Estonian Parliament, I can use the pen only a few times a month. When it does happen, it is usually to sign a letter to one of you, my colleagues.

All this is possible because the national ID card-based system allows for easy and secure identification across multiple platforms. Embracing digital solutions and e-services has become an important part of the Estonian lifestyle. While the EU countries differ considerably in e-services they provide, the successful Tallinn Digital Summit in September 2017 was a proof that you share our enthusiasm and commitment to building a truly digital Europe.

European defense and security

Dear friends,

Allow me to say a few words on the two topics we are going to discuss today and tomorrow: the future of the EU, and European security and defense.

During the past years, security in and around Europe has been challenged in various ways. Terrorism and conflicts not too far from our borders are examples of threats that need to be addressed by us collectively. The EU has shown remarkable ability in adjusting to changing circumstances. The European Defense Fund was launched in June 2017, followed by a landmark decision to establish an inclusive and ambitious defense cooperation – the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) – in December last year.

While our collective defense will always remain in the hands of NATO, the creation of PESCO proves the viability of the EU in the field of defense and security. Some people wondered whether PESCO would duplicate NATO's efforts or somehow undermine the Alliance. I can once again assure you that this is not the case.

Estonia held the Presidency of the Council of the EU when these decisions were taken, and we would never have worked on any of those projects if there would have been even a slight possibility that they could, in any way, weaken NATO. We cannot afford that, our security is simply too important for us to do that.

Future of the EU

Dear friends,

Our discussion on the future of the EU is a part of a broader effort by the EU institutions, national parliaments and governments to reflect on the responsibilities that the Union ought to undertake in the years to come. It is no secret that our viewpoints in this regard differ, but I trust we will have a very honest and open debate.

The EU is not just an impersonal organization with a mandate to deal with a certain set of issues. It is much more than that. It is a part of who we are as Europeans, and this is why it is critical that we do all we can to bring the Union closer to its citizens. This is why we asked you to think about how the EU could not just communicate more with its citizens, but to do it better. We ought to be at the forefront of this effort, as national parliaments have a special role and ability in connecting with their societies.

Conclusion

Dear Colleagues,

I would like to conclude by thanking all of you for being here today, for your great cooperation during the first-ever Estonian Presidency (of the Council of the EU), and your contribution to strengthening our Union.

A century-old Estonia will continue to respect and defend our common values and will follow through on our promises, but I can assure you that we will not lose our youthful spirit, openness, and readiness to improve and grow. Not just internally, but also as a member of the EU.

Take it from us that freedom can never be taken for granted. But if we work together, protect our values and our way of life, then there is nothing that can break our bond and our Union.

Thank you very much.