

Speech by the President of the Riigikogu Mr Henn Põlluaas at the European Conference of Presidents of Parliament at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on 24 October 2019 in Strasbourg, France

Excellencies, dear Colleagues,

Estonia became the member of the Council of Europe on May 1993 but already in 1960, the Consultative Assembly of the CE which later became the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe commemorated the anniversary of the annexation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania with a special resolution condemning the brutal act of the Soviet Union.

Estonia has gained from the membership of the Council of Europe. We have invited Council experts to consult our legislative process after regaining our independence and thus ensured that our laws are in full accordance with the international norms. Estonia was the first among Central and Eastern European countries to successfully close the PACE monitoring mission back in 1997. Estonia has been actively committed to the cooperation in the Council: twice – in 1996 and 2016 – we have served as the rotating president of the Council.

Ladies and gentlemen,

That being said allow me to return to the PACE session in June when the voting rights of the Russian delegation were restored by the Assembly. With this act PACE overrode the fundamental principle of the Council of Europe: protection of the universal human rights. The war is still waged in the hart of Europe. People are still hurt and killed in violent action. Russia has committed aggressive acts against Ukraine and refrained from following internationally negotiated guidelines to resolve the conflict. We need to keep the pressure on perpetrator and demand the violations of the basic human rights in Eastern Ukraine to cease.

Every international organization is created on a foundation of mutually agreed rules and standards. This agreed framework of international law is supposed to provide us with a certain safety net of trust, applied universally by every Member State. The equality before the law encourages a small state instinctively trust the principle of rule of law and believe in active international cooperation. This trust can be easy to lose.

Russia's systematic aggressive demonstration of lack of respect for international law and UN Charter signals desire for conflicts and instability. Destabilizing behaviour affects not just neighbouring states but the whole Euro-Atlantic area. We have to unite our efforts to counter this gravely dangerous development.

The PACE decision in June did not do justice to the countries facing aggression by their neighbour or trying to solve the frozen conflicts. We have seen an increasing number of frozen conflicts related to Russia - starting with Transnistria, Abkhazia, followed by violent actions regarding South Ossetia in Georgia, annexation of Crimea and wars in Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine.

The PACE June decision encourages the bully to reach further, to grab more. By changing the rules, our Assembly lost its ability to put pressure on countries that violate our common rules. Inability to counter aggression and neglecting the breach of the law undermines the trust in organization and cooperation in general. Yet we cannot afford weakening European security situation or crumbling human rights framework. We are under obligation to consolidate our Common European Home. Nobody is going to do it instead of us.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Estonia is a democratic state with a law-abiding society and for us the principle of sticking to the rules is a fundamental value. We recognize the importance of the PACE as a unique forum uniting 47 different countries to a single family. Estonia remain an active member of Council of Europe, because only then developments could be effectively influenced by both word and deed. Estonia does not act alone: together with the colleagues from the likeminded countries – Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia, Ukraine, Poland and United Kingdom – we continue to coordinate our next steps. Dear Colleagues, the Council of Europe @ 70 is so much more than celebrations – it's a call to action. 47+ nations deserve a safe and tidy home.

Thank you!