

Henn Põlluaas
President of the Riigikogu

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President of the Republic of Estonia, President Rüütel, Members of the Riigikogu, Prime Minister, Government of the Republic, representatives of the constitutional institutions, Excellencies, guests,

I am honoured to welcome you to the festive opening sitting of the 2020 autumn session of the Riigikogu.

Although the Estonian parliament is young on a global history scale, by now we are more mature and stronger than ever before. On this winding road, there have been agreements and disagreements, and various arguments from opposing sides. Many of you present here in this hall have shown a commendable way with words when protecting your positions.

Our parliament is relatively young, and so is the Estonian democracy. We had a new harsh but valuable experience of democracy when resolving the crisis related to the pandemic this spring and summer. We have been and are among the most successful countries in the world in this.

All the problems faced and decisions made in the pandemic crisis, from the budget and the saving of jobs and economy to the protection of people, and many other issues, were analysed thoroughly and explained in the Riigikogu committees and plenary. There were many different perspectives and positions where MP-s, both from the government coalition and the opposition side, raised serious and relevant questions. That stimulated the parliamentary debate necessary for the country. Like never before, we also cooperated closely at the level of the Council of Elders. Although certain circles wish to use the crisis to demean their opponents, I still believe that such a process has lead all stakeholders towards better initiatives and more focused policies.

The COVID-19 situation is indefinite and unpredictable. Therefore we need to do everything to minimise risks to human life and health, and to ensure the functioning and recovery of society and economy. For that, we have adopted a number of important measures that have justified themselves, but we cannot sit back.

We all make up an important thread in the strengthening of the structure of the Estonian society. Both in the form and the content. In a broader perspective, be it in the parliament,

in the public, in the media or social media. We still tend to have disagreements and clashes that seem to be irreconcilable. This is understandable, because the media creates and brings us increasingly dramatic headlines and often exaggerating comments. However, if we took a step back to see the bigger picture, we would see that it is merely a mixing of shadows on the same palette. The real problems remain the same. They recur, and they need simple and at times faster solutions.

Excellencies, friends and guests,

This year marks a hundred years since the first Constitution of the Republic of Estonia was drafted and signed. It was not one hundred percent perfect, which would in fact be impossible. But it was indisputably one of the most democratic constitutions in the world. It introduced referendum, public initiative and the principles of direct democracy.

At present, we do not have direct democracy, but it should be part of our everyday democratic culture. Direct democracy is not a spectre or meaningless farce to be feared. We should trust our people. The Riigikogu must have confidence in the people, because reasonable initiative from below is a great support in exercising governmental authority.

Often we do not see or notice what the actual interests and needs of the people are. Or do not wish to see. For example, the will of the overwhelming majority of the people to establish the possibility of a public initiative and direct election of the President, or to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman in the Constitution. This way, we may, and indeed have, ended up in a situation where the state is forcing unwanted and unacceptable rules and value systems on its citizens. As a result, the discontent of the people has only increased over time. The people express their dissent in various ways, with petitions and meetings, and by being sceptical and passive, but also depressive and defiant. The whole country stands to lose.

Adding direct democracy elements to the currently existing political system is an important means of self-expression for citizens in the periods between elections. This would help make the elected representatives of the people more responsible, discipline the political elite, and bring us all closer to the people.

In the future, the principles and practice of direct democracy would become an additional element of representational governance that would add a new dimension to the parliamentary democracy model. This way, a broad electorate is involved in the bringing up of topics and making decisions. This in its turn makes democracy representative by nature, and a really strong and human-friendly political mechanism. Both the country and the people stand to gain.

Ladies and gentlemen,

What will become of the Estonian parliament and democracy in the future? It seems to me that there are still several common challenges we need to acknowledge more deeply and to try to meet.

One of them is greater flexibility and activity in parliamentary work. We need to speak in the Riigikogu about the topics the people are discussing. Such topics must be spoken about at the right time, and not with a long delay. Otherwise we are living and staying in an isolated bubble and focusing on performing tasks that are not a priority. The Riigikogu should assume a greater role in initiating legislation.

As we have seen in the case of COVID-19, it is often vitally important to include urgent issues in the agenda at once and to solve them. However, things must not be over-dramatised. A balanced approach is needed.

Another important area is digital democracy which may give rise to conflicting feelings. On the one hand, it is a paradoxical sense of distance and closeness in democracy. On the other hand, however, it engages larger masses more quickly. Modern information technology has become strongly rooted in the communication strategy of voters, especially young people.

The main impact of the technological revolution of the last two decades is that people who are physically far apart have been brought close in a new way. Transformed communication channels have enabled people to communicate ever more closely with one other. The Internet, smartphones and numerous social media channels allow people to participate in large invisible web communities. People are interconnected through common interests and views. Whatever they are. Wherever they are.

Estonia is a global pioneer in providing digital services, but we need a fundamental and comprehensive discussion on the relations between technology and politics, and technology and the parliament. We must be more imaginative and more experimenting in terms of new trends, without however making concessions at the expense of digital security. We in the Riigikogu could also be more active and show more leadership. We must not become passive hangers-on or reckless followers.

I have a good news, colleagues. This spring, we amended our Rules of Procedure and Internal Rules Act, so that, in a crisis situation where the parliament cannot convene physically, it would be possible to hold Riigikogu plenary sittings electronically. We have

been developing a relevant platform for the whole summer and it is already in the testing stage. Only a few parliaments have such a possibility of electronic sittings and I dare affirm that ours is a cut above all of them. In the near future we will all have a chance to test it.

In summary, the Estonian people have sent a clear message: starting from young people to the elderly, everyone wishes their MP-s to work together with them and for them in the most important issues. Estonia needs further development of representative democracy, direct democracy as well as digital democracy. Especially in the epoch where we all sometimes become sceptical and visibly cynical about politics, politicians and political institutions.

Our role in the democratic process is a privilege and a responsibility. Through them, we respect and protect everyone's wishes and rights. We serve our country and every person in Estonia without exception.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is one area that has remained unchanged despite crises and extraordinary situations. It is our foreign and security policy.

We remain situated in a dangerous region in an insecure situation. Our eastern neighbour, Russia, is organising regular military manoeuvres at our border with threatening persistence. It is trying to expand and strengthen its grip on its neighbours, in an attempt to restore its former empire. The core principle of our security policy is and will continue to be to preserve Estonia as a nation state, to strengthen our defence capability in every way, and to secure our international position. In order to increase Estonia's security, mental and physical readiness as well as resourcefulness and entrepreneurship are necessary.

In addition to the military aggression against Georgia and Ukraine in recent years, Russia's military intervention in the events in Belarus is also to be feared. We are following the events very closely. At a recent extraordinary sitting, we adopted a Statement of the Riigikogu to support the democratic aspirations of the people of Belarus and to condemn all forms of both internal and external violence and intervention. I am delighted that the Riigikogu showed great cross-party unanimity in that.

Indisputably, security issues also include the digital and information space that I mentioned earlier, because nowadays it is one of the battlegrounds and we cannot let our enemies fill it with demagogy, lies and hostile propaganda against us. I do not know today if we will ever have to begin to discuss suspension of the transmission of certain media as has been done in various parts of the world. Time will tell, I suppose.

Members of the Riigikogu, Estonian people,

Although we may have different approaches to problems, we definitely share the common opinion that the state must in any case try to improve the life of the Estonian people. If we have good will and sufficient readiness to cooperate, we can do it. Opposition can be either destructive or constructive. Only the latter case, and not confrontation or anger, brings actual success.

After all, we all know that we need to make joint efforts to achieve the best results. Everything we do must be based on our national interests. This is enshrined in our Constitution, and it is an inevitable duty for us all to follow this.

We are facing complicated tasks. These tasks are achievable if we focus on the people who have sent us here to the Riigikogu. Young people. Mothers and fathers. Grandparents. They are representatives of various generations and walks of life. We are exactly as strong as our weakest link.

Let us notice our most vulnerable people and areas, and shortcomings in education, science, culture and entrepreneurship. Let us stretch out a helping and supporting hand to them. Let us keep the Estonian spirit, economy and society strong.

The generations of the past, today and the future are united by unwavering faith and trust in Estonia as a nation state, its traditional values and sovereignty, as well as in progress and technological innovations.

Only with such unconquerable and collective will can we come out of the toughest situation faster, better and stronger. United we win. United, we will see bright days full of work and joy.

May you be protected and healthy.

I wish you every strength for the forthcoming session.