

# **President of the Riigikogu Jüri Ratas at the Opening Sitting of the Autumn Session, 13 September 2021**

**President of the Republic,**

**President Rüütel,**

**Members of the Riigikogu,**

**Prime Minister, members of the Government, constitutional officials,**

**Excellencies ambassadors, diplomatic corps,**

**Estonians!**

Last month, August 20, we celebrated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the restoration of our independence. In the Riigikogu building, we can see an exhibition dedicated to this. The individuals, their actions and decisions recorded there make us stop for a second in gratitude and remind ourselves for ever that this was the way we regained our independence 30 years ago. Their courage and political acumen must always remain an example for us all, both in this plenary hall and everywhere else. On the other hand, the restoration forced our people and the political leaders of the time to face huge challenges.

**Colleagues,** as we are today opening the 6<sup>th</sup> session of the 14<sup>th</sup> Riigikogu, we must carry forward, develop, but also safeguard and protect the pillars of our democratic and parliamentary state as these are laid out in our Constitution. This is the Estonia that is built on freedom, justice and law, this is the country of our fathers where the preservation of the Estonian nation, language, and culture is ensured throughout the ages. A country where the highest power is invested in the people. I firmly believe that these values provide the framework and the content to our discussions and debates during the autumn session like always.

**President of the Republic Kersti Kaljulaid,** I read the news about your state visit to Kenya. You referred to several important aspects, including improved economic cooperation with Kenya as well as with Africa more broadly, and our two countries belonging simultaneously to the UN Security Council this year. You contributed very strongly to our national campaign to join the UN Security Council. It was a tough competition where we achieved a truly important and historical victory. Thank you very much for that! And furthermore, allow me to thank you

on behalf of the Riigikogu for your entire term as the President of the Republic and wish you all the luck for the future.

**Members of the Riigikogu, colleagues,**

It is our job to make decisions in this hall, with as broad a consensus as possible. I am proud of the Riigikogu who understood this duty and elected the next President of the Republic in the second election round. I am very grateful to the members of the Riigikogu for this accomplishment. On behalf of the Riigikogu, I would also like to wish the president-elect Alar Karis all the success in his future work as the President of the Republic. I am sure he will distinguish himself in this position as he has always done, and will also bring in something new and fresh, as it should be.

We must seriously review the procedure of presidential elections, which was again sharply raised before the elections. Some like the current system, some want to reform the electoral college level, and some talk about direct elections. It is largely up to us to decide what the procedure should be in five years' time. At least the 14<sup>th</sup> Riigikogu has the opportunity to initiate these discussions. I believe that it is fair and necessary to have a political debate in this issue, and find the best solution. One thing is certain: setting up the candidates earlier will definitely benefit the whole process.

**Members of the Riigikogu,** our work during this session must be even more geared towards a dialogue with each and every person living in Estonia. A dialogue about how our people cope, feel secure, how our nation would survive, about both mental and physical health, education, economy, this exhausting corona virus, and international situation. We can only have a dialogue if talking and listening are balanced. I believe that this will help to pacify our society, improve relations, and increase our faith in our future. We need all this in our complicated world and in Estonia very much.

Over the last eighteen months, corona virus has closed many doors in health care and educational institutions, businesses, culture, churches, our personal contacts with family

members, friends, and international partners. All this has cost us a lot. Many have lost the most valuable thing they had – their life. It is quite often that I think about the families and the people who will never see their family member, relative, friend, or colleague ever again because of COVID-19. Many who have left us because of the virus could have happily seen many more Christmases, new springs, sunny summers, and colourful autumns...

COVID-19 must remain a priority here in the Riigikogu, to further enhance our initiative. I am grateful to the many among you who have discussed this topic and have proposed solutions either in this hall or in factions, committees, the Council of Elders, or more broadly in the society. My special thanks go to the Social Affairs Committee and the State Budget Control Select Committee who have been very active in dealing with COVID-19 issues. Our objective is clear – a society that is as open as possible and where the people's health is ensured. But we still need to make stronger efforts to get there. Science-based approach consists in vaccination, in cooperation with your GP or attending physician. I thank everyone who has already made their contribution by getting vaccinated, but I also understand those who are still hesitant. Together we must help to dispel their fears and explain things without condemning anyone. It is also important to provide security and a clear goal for the future. Allowing the society to function with as few restrictions as possible indeed has certain preconditions, but to achieve these, we must work together. One aspect is definitely the very high protection rate of the risk groups near the 85% coverage, supported by an at least 70% vaccination rate among the general population.

The autumn session starts today with a draft resolution on cultural facilities, which we last discussed in this hall about twenty five years ago. This concerns the construction and renovation of cultural facilities of national importance. This is definitely a resolution that has a historical, cultural, regional, economic, international, and future oriented dimension. Estonian teachers, school and education are our path to the future. Today we will also start discussing the Education Sector Development Plan for the next fifteen years.

As is tradition, the autumn session brings us to discuss the next year's state budget. I welcome and support those who argue that Riigikogu's decision-making competence in this question should be expanded, first and foremost so that the Finance Committee could make certain proposals. I sincerely hope that the discussion pertaining to the 2022 state budget will be serious, in-depth, and motivated to find answers. The livelihood of our people and their income-

based social-economic sense of security should be just as much a priority and an essential part of the upcoming state budget as is 1 % of the GDP spent on research and development, or 2 % spent on national defence.

I invite all committees and factions to be more active in initiating discussions of matters of significant national importance. For example, the 13<sup>th</sup> Riigikogu discussed a total of 39 such matters, while the 12<sup>th</sup> Riigikogu held 29 debates in this manner. The 14<sup>th</sup> Riigikogu has discussed 21 matters of significant national importance. This week, another scheduled debate will add to that number: “Inequality in Estonia – is it possible to escape poverty by making cuts?” The autumn session will also be the time to prepare for implementing the Estonia 2035 strategy. I invite everyone to contribute through your factions to improving Riigikogu Rules of Procedure and Internal Rules Act, so that it may better serve the next parliament.

### **Ladies and gentlemen,**

The international geopolitical situation is truly alarming. The latest events in Afghanistan and on the Belarus border clearly demonstrate how important it is to build a strong democratic state and to foster allied relations. But it is also a lesson to be learned. Our sovereignty is first and foremost protected by our own willingness to defend and by a strong and united society. Last year and this year, we gained a lot of experience in the UN Security Council. The NATO Combat Team is still stationed in Poland and the Baltic States. Our airspace is still defended by NATO. All of this is a confirmation of mutual understanding.

Two days and twenty years ago, the sense of security of the free and democratic world took a serious hit, with immeasurable consequences. The events of 9/11 might have broken several walls of our freedom, but not its foundation. Unfortunately, terrorism has not disappeared from the world. On these cornerstones of the free world we need to continue building daily an even stronger, smarter, and more solid structure that will protect peace in the world and stand firm against violence. We also play an important part in building this structure. As Estonia is an active Member State of the European Union, the Riigikogu will soon need to discuss matters like contributing to economic growth, questions of environmental protection, digitisation, and the future of the European Union.

### **Colleagues,**

In 28 days, the local government council elections will begin. In 79 local governments across Estonia, the highest power will decide who will lead their local government councils for the next four years, and how. I know that many of us are also running as candidates at the local elections. This is also an aspect of democracy. The current legislation gives an elected member of the Riigikogu the possibility to also work in the local government council, but this can only be in addition to and in support of their work here in the parliament, not at the expense of it. Everyone must decide for themselves if they are up to it or not.

**Voters** from across Estonia, from all the 79 local governments, I invite you to participate in the elections and to fulfil your civic duty. It is your decision that will influence the wellbeing of your home region. Please vote and make an educated choice.

**Members of the Riigikogu,**

Any idea is worth considering, no matter where in this hall it came from or who proposed it. We demonstrated only recently that even in the most complex circumstances we are able to come up with broad-based decisions. I hope that this spirit of cooperation prevails during the autumn session.

**Colleagues, I wish you success in your work.**

**All the success to Estonia!**