

The President, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, spoke last night in Riga at the annual memorial lecture for philosopher Isaiah Berlin about the internal and external threats to liberal democracy, in which he said: challenges to liberal democracy have been posed by both the authoritarian regime from the East and the ultra rapid development of technology within our own societies.

We can see how 80% of Russia supports the military annexation of Crimea, but describing the situation, the Head of State also spoke about the attack against the freedom of speech or the wish to limit the choice, available to our partners right here in Europe, the occurrence of which Europeans could not predict even until recently.

President Ilves admitted that the crisis in Ukraine, initiated and encouraged by Russia, is not solely the problem of Eastern Europe.

"The Western World in general is facing a new situation, created by an authoritarian regime in the East. I'm speaking about serious external challenges, which the liberal world has been forced to face in the last six months," emphasised the Estonian Head of State.

"In such a radically new situation, the liberal, democratic West is still looking for answers, unable to agree upon the nature of such answers. We still have no idea how we should respond," he stated.

In addressing the internal challenges, President Ilves told the several hundred people who had come to listen to him that the transformation, which is currently taking place in our modern, digital society, is so drastic that it can be compared to the industrial revolution 150 years ago; however, the changes of today are much faster and are taking place everywhere at the same time.

"Everything is suddenly different and this trend will continue. Not just the way we pursue our lives, which type of work we do and what kind of education we need – but also the interpretation given to the definitions that mark the main values of liberal democracy – freedom, privacy, transparency and democracy itself; also the meaning attached to the public and private sphere and the mutual relations between and state and its citizens," added the Head of State.

"Internetisation and the digital world in general have been linked, from the very beginning, to the idea of freedom. At the same time, the degree to which people are concerned about their privacy has increased, above all, over the last couple of years, especially after the Snowden scandal, which broke last year," said President Ilves. The President added: "We all want to be free in the "positive" meaning of the word – or, using the terms of Isaiah Berlin – do everything that modern, digital technology will enable us to do. However, we also want to be free in the "negative" sense of the word, free from surveillance or excessive restrictions."

According to the Head of State, the times that are about to start will change our lives more and faster than over the last decades, as now our everyday life is becoming increasingly dependent on an Internet-based system, which means that we will become more vulnerable to cyber attacks, cyber espionage and cyber crime, which even George Orwell hardly could have imagined.

"To cope with all this, the digital era involves giving new meanings to the staple social concepts, like privacy, transparency and the relations between public and private spheres. We must keep an open mind when considering the future of freedom and democracy," the Head of State said.

President Ilves emphasised that considering the complicated situations that are emerging all over the world, we must keep our eyes on the fundamental principles of liberal democracy – in other words, we must continue to respect human rights, the supremacy of the state, based on the rule of law and free and fair elections.

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