

"Our duty in the European Union is not to forget the main values. We must not submit to threats by force in international relationships; we must not agree to frozen conflicts and the annexing of territories. All governments must acknowledge and honour the independence and freedom of civil society and its vital role in shaping society," said President Ilves today in his opening speech at the Annual Assembly of the European Union-Russia Civil Society Forum.

The Head of State stressed that there is a strong relationship between civil society and democracy – democracy develops best in an environment where civil society has been ingrained for centuries. "Autocratic heads of state who cannot understand that people are capable of doing something themselves, voluntary and without orders, also realise it. They are afraid of free civic initiative and tend to search for some hostile foreign puppeteer behind people's movements," President Ilves said. "So all kinds of conspiracy theories about Maidan have been proposed. We remember from the days of the Estonian Singing Revolution that people came together by themselves and spontaneously to demand freedom; nobody ordered us to do it," he added.

President Ilves said that Estonia was able to quickly restore democracy and voluntary civil society activity in villages and cities after the restoration of independence.

"As Estonia has become one of the most developed digital societies in the world, our civil society is also very active virtually," the Head of State said, using the example of the People's Assembly, virtual brainstorming for collecting ideas. In three weeks people submitted 1,974 ideas through the virtual platform. The page was visited by more than 50,000 unique visitors from 87 countries. The collected ideas and comments were worked through and 15 of them were given over to the Parliament as proposals.

"This is one example of how our e-state opportunities can be used to involve people from all over the country in solving our common problems together," President Ilves said.

The Head of State also spoke of the "Let's do it!" initiative, an undertaking that was born from a symbiosis of civil society and IT solutions, where a mobile application was used to take photos of waste lying around in different places or piles of waste already gathered together by volunteers; add automatic GPS coordinates and send the information to a logistics company whose garbage truck can then come and take waste away. This all led to a massive waste

clean-up action in 2008 where 30,000 people across the country helped collect waste. This year 11 million people in 122 countries participated in the "Let's do it!" cleaning up initiative.

"This is an excellent example of an entirely voluntary civil society action that has become worldwide thanks to technology," the Head of State said.

As a third example of civil society, President Ilves used the Estonian Defence League, an interesting voluntary-based military organisation that has currently 13,000 members. Together with the Women's Voluntary Defence Organisation (Naiskodukaitse), Young Eagles (Noored Kotkad) and Home Daughters (Kodutütred), it has more than 21,000 volunteers.

Office of the President
Public Relations Department
Phone +372 631 6229