

The President, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, and political scientist and writer Francis Fukuyama discussed the future of information technology in Stanford University, Silicon Valley. Estonia is the only country in the world where one can cast their election vote online, which represents a unique global example of harnessing technology to promote democracy.

The discussion focused on the role of technology in the election processes of democratic countries and harnessing technology to enhance participation in elections and trust in democracy. President Ilves and political scientist Fukuyama discussed whether the choice to prefer electronic proceedings is any different for consumers when using the same technology to fulfil their duties as citizens or, for example, to cast their vote in elections.

In Estonia, voters have had the choice to cast an e-vote at election time on eight occasions in all since 2005. President Ilves emphasised that one of the positive aspects of e-voting is the opportunity to cast your vote from any geographical location by using digital identity or ID card/Mobile ID and upload the required software into your computer. For example, 1/3 of the electorate from a total of 116 countries used the e-voting option when casting their votes for the 2015 Riigikogu elections.

"The proportion of e-voters continues to grow. This demonstrates that people choose electronic voting channels as they have trust in the system. While gender, age or residence-related differences could be observed among standard voters and e-voters in the initial few years, the latest studies have shown that these differences have disappeared," added President Ilves.

The Head of State emphasised that Estonia is very serious about ensuring the security of e-services, and various technical, legal and administrative steps have been taken to this end at state level. Ensuring safety has the key importance of maintaining the trust of our citizens, told President Ilves.

"To date, I have had no reason to doubt the security of the system. In fact, for me it is safer to have a digital health record instead of a paper file. Digital records show who has viewed them and whether this has been justified; in the case of paper documents, it is impossible to be sure whether the records have been maliciously tampered with," added the Estonian Head of State.

During the discussion, Francis Fukuyama raised the question of information technology development interfering with the private sphere of people at a certain moment. According to President Ilves, Google's smart glasses, Glass, is quite definitely teetering on the edge. He added that people also voluntarily give away loads of information about themselves by using various free telephone apps: "There is no such thing as a free app. Someone, somewhere is making lots of money with these data."

Fukuyama also admitted that Americans are always upset when they feel that the government violates their privacy, while at the same time they share huge amounts of personal information by using various applications and are totally oblivious to the fact themselves.

On the other hand, according to the Estonian Head of State, the development of information technology will ensure more and more transparency for the purposes of public governance, such as public sector spending.

Ilves and political scientist Fukuyama also exchanged ideas about the freedom of the internet.

"Certain authoritarian countries insist on restricting the freedom of the internet. In Estonia, we find that such restrictions and the promotion of these restrictions by various international organisations are highly dangerous. The freedom of the internet is an important aspect for a well-operating civil society; therefore, it is one of the tools for promoting and ensuring democracy," emphasised the Estonian Head of State.

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