

“One cannot equate the sense of community and current local governments. Thus it is wrong to think that by enlarging the borders of rural municipalities, the sense communal solidarity disappears,” President Toomas Hendrik Ilves said at yesterday’s working meeting of the Roundtable of Local Government and Regional Development.

The Head of State brought the one-time Halliste parish as an example, which is now split between several rural municipalities, but has still preserved its cultural identity, and also mentioned other cross-local-border communities such as the *setod*, *mulgid*, *wõrokad*, and Old Believers.

According to President Ilves, there are an irrationally large number of local governments in Estonia today and unification would make many them more effective and improve local life.

“The current situation needs to be changed, because it is wrong when people, who honestly pay their taxes to the state, do not receive equally good public service from their local governments,” President Ilves said.

The Head of State supports the voluntary unification of local governments and entreats local government leaders to treat the topic of unification seriously.

“I am not discussing how many local governments there should be—whether the best option would be, for instance, the one-time parishes or today’s counties,” President Ilves said. “However, what is important is the clear understanding that if voluntary unification falters, sooner or later, we will arrive at the point in Estonia, where the state must assert oneself in respect to this question.”

The smaller the local government, the more limited are its opportunities for fulfilling important functions for the residents, the more dependent it is on the money of others—i.e. the state—and therefore the opportunities to organize its life are also limited, President Ilves said, adding that local governments that are too small lack the possibilities to organize their own life and remain more dependent on decisions made by others.

“Examining our economic development in regard to investments, we need to cooperate not only with the local governments that are next door, but also with those who are next to the one’s next door and this is an important step toward preparing for unification,” the Head of State stressed. “Speaking of such cooperation, I also have in mind the organization of school networks, and projects completed with European Union funds, as well as the construction of sports facilities, and the maintenance and repair of road networks—none of these problems should be the concern of only one rural municipality, but an issue for several local governments.”

Also in attendance at the working meeting of the Roundtable of President’s Local Government and Regional Development were Minister of Finance Ivari Padar, who spoke about the role of local governments in the state budgetary process, and Minister of Regional Affairs Siim-Valmar Kiisler, who spoke about the goals of regional policy.

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