

"How should Estonia avoid becoming a country in which all of the population is concentrated solely in a couple of large towns?" asked President Toomas Hendrik Ilves today in Tallinn, where he addressed the opening of the Day of Towns and Rural Municipalities.

According to the President, people's problems may express themselves in issues that seems trivial at first, such as the possible closure of an ATM in Virtsu, but fragments like this form part of a bigger question. How can we provide a living environment in the countryside in which people can and want to live.

"We appreciate that a workplace located a great distance from home is never cheap for employees. Through utilising its agencies and institutions, the state must facilitate the existence and creation of jobs outside of large towns, whether by maintaining state agencies in county centres or supporting services provided by state-owned companies. Various institutions can maintain their departments in county centres, by channelling work that would otherwise be concentrated in Tallinn to these locations, and using the possibilities offered by modern information technology," President Ilves said. "The state must help to resolve the situations in which jobs so badly needed in the countryside are never created, as the subscription fees that are being demanded by the energy companies are so high that starting companies cannot meet them."

Everyone has a constitutional right to live a dignified life, receive assistance in times of hardship and health problems, and feel safe, whether we of dispatching police or rescue workers. This means that people living outside large centres should not be left alone and in trouble, the Head of State told.

"I will repeat myself as I am convinced and demanding: we cannot lose a state from a state," President Ilves confirmed.

He recalled the ruling of the Supreme Court of 2010, which ruled on the implementation of a reasonable division of tasks between the national and local governments and the allocation of funds required for the fulfilment of all the national responsibilities by rural municipalities and towns, as well as sufficient funds for all the functions that are, according to their nature, to be fulfilled by local governments.

"Has this court ruling been carried out? In essence, no. I have heard that this would mean maintaining the agreed status quo, as opposed to reforming local governments and reviewing the functions that establish a funding scheme to match the new division of tasks and changing some of the boundaries, if appropriate. I am afraid this is rather short-sighted," the Head of State told.

"Let me remind you: local life is an issue that should be resolved, most expediently, within the limits of a town or rural municipality. But this has nothing to do, for example, with the organisation of modern gymnasium education, which is highly complicated or even exceeds the capacities of most local governments. In this, I am inviting the state – which is in control of education – to enter into sensible co-operation with local authorities to determine the most appropriate and wisest solutions," President Ilves said. "However, on the other hand, I cannot understand a local government complaining about the lack of funds for solving local problems, while at the same time launching an expensive media project comparable to a TV channel with extensive broadcasting area. This is a waste of people's taxes."

The interest of towns and rural municipalities is not only in receiving extra funds from the state; it is also the reasonable division of mandatory functions between the state, local governments and their different co-operation partners, said the Head of State.

"The goal is – and has to be – much bigger: a good living environment, which reaches as many places as possible throughout Estonia. High-quality and available public services only form a part of this. Here, the co-operation between local governments inside a county and beyond county borders could be one of the options, as well as better co-operation between the national and local governments to provide better services to our people," President Ilves stated.

He suggested an idea for the heads of local governments for further elaboration: giving up the requirement of all the rural municipalities and towns to fulfil the same functions, regardless of their location, number of population, and infrastructure.

"On the one hand, there is no need whatsoever for some services in some of the rural municipalities while on the other hand, it would be unthinkable for a single rural municipality to offer some of the services alone, as there is a lack of the competent employees or money required. Therefore, I do believe that we need a principal and substantial change in the

organisation of local governments, not such a facelift," stated the Head of State. "The goal here is easy to define: every rural municipality and city government must, in a way, become a think tank and a centre of excellence. And this must definitely take place in co-operation with neighbouring rural municipalities, the government and the third sector."

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