

"I am proud of our conscripts who have been good students and our officers who have been good teachers to them," President Toomas Hendrik Ilves said while visiting the 'Spring Storm' major military exercise of the Defence Forces.

"'Spring Storm', which is also a final exam for the conscripts, confirms that maintaining military service has been a right decision for Estonia, by adding to the numbers of young men who are willing and capable of defending their country with our allies, should the need arise," the Head of State affirmed. "Often, they understand it more clearly than others: freedom is not simply a right to complain; freedom is only possible with a readiness to defend that freedom."

In addition, military service provides many future decision-makers with an understanding of what constitutes national defence in reality, President Ilves noted.

In his view, it is significant that the participants of 'Spring Storm' also include our NATO allies from the United States, United Kingdom, Poland, Belgium, Latvia and Lithuania - more than 400 military personnel in total.

"In this way, the exercise that practises the defence of the NATO member state of Estonia is confirmation of the inner solidarity and mutual support in the alliance," President Ilves emphasised.

He praised municipal governments for letting the exercise with nearly 5,000 members of the Defence Forces take place on their territory and for their help and support: "This is a wonderful example of the co-operation of municipal governments who understand the need for the Defence Forces and the exercise."

In an interview with the Sõdurileht newspaper, the Head of State listed Estonian international strengths such as contributing to cyber security, special operations capabilities and especially professional bomb disposal teams. Answering a question about whether the Estonian Defence Forces should participate in other hotspots after leaving Afghanistan, President Ilves responded: "Absolutely. How else are our Defence Forces going to gain experiences in real crisis situations?"

The President of the Republic, the highest leader of national defence, was accompanied at 'Spring Storm' by the chief of defence, Major General Riho Terras and the general commander of the exercise, Colonel Artur Tiganik. President Ilves visited the operational command of the exercise and met with the members of the Defence Forces of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the United Kingdom, and had a soldier's meal.

More than 4,000 members of the Defence Forces, the National Defence League, reserve forces and officials take part in the exercise.

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