

"Smallness is not a handicap. Unless we think of ourselves as being small, in other words incapable and insignificant. But why would we do that?" President Toomas Hendrik Ilves said at the "Estonia as a Small Country" conference, which is being organised by the Estonian Cooperation Assembly.

"Smallness could even be an advantage for both the country and society, especially in today's technologically advanced society, where there is worry that machines will rob people of their jobs and where size does not necessarily give you a competitive edge," the Head of State said, adding: "Smallness means the possibility of flexibility and speed. The possibility of innovation, boldly trying new solutions, as we have done with our e-state. And to be communal - available for everyone. A small country is truly our own."

He stressed that being born into a society that is cohesive like Estonia is a fortune, rather than a misfortune: "In a dynamic small country, it is possible to reach everyone. We can think logical decisions through properly and discuss them amongst ourselves. We can make necessary changes in a quick, civilised manner."

At the same time, President Ilves noted that the "Estonia as a Small Country" conference would not have been organised if we all were equally happy about being born in a small country and that if Estonia's only problem was the confusion over a cultural weekly – as one might think when looking at the public discourse over the past week.

"Of course, culture and its adequate coverage are important, especially for a small nation. It is also important for us that decisions are made according to good practice and people are treated with respect. Because as I have often stressed: here, everyone knows everyone and the public can easily become personal," President Ilves said. "Too easily, I would say. Even the smallest mistakes made in a small society can be translated and interpreted or exaggerated into threats to the survival of the state and nation. That is what sets us apart from great nations. With them, survival is never an issue, let alone a point of discussion."

At the same time, we are not so small that we should agree on everything; even in a small country one can afford different opinions and arguments without necessarily seeing the opposing side as the enemy, which makes way for new and unexpected opportunities, the Head of State said.

"The affairs of one's country are not simply for the government and the parliament. We all can offer ideas. Well-argued criticism in the form of creative suggestions should be the spirit of our discussion. There is always room for improvement. Don't be afraid to offer what and how," he encouraged.

"Smallness becomes a problem when we come to a stop, become too complacent," President Ilves stressed, recalling the great, clear and right choices of the last decade, which have defined Estonia's position on the world stage - rule of law, the European Union, NATO.

"However, there has also been indecision and inactivity, which are amplified by Estonia's smallness and, regrettably, its pettiness. Administrative division, administrative load, immigration policy and educational organisation are some areas in which the current solutions are not working sufficiently today. Yet there are also no new, reasonable and sustainable solutions or agreements," he noted.

"In an exaggerated hope for stability, it would be unreasonable to alienate those who think differently and offer solutions that have not been seen in Finland, Germany or perhaps any other country. All issues must be on the table. Estonia needs ideas more than it needs ideologies," the Head of State said.

Having reached our current development level and taking into account the general economic environment and population processes in Estonia, we cannot expect the pre-crisis sharp pace of development to continue; that means we have to make choices - this could also mean giving up certain things, as well as rethinking earlier hopes and expectations, President Ilves admitted.

According to him, instead of loudly voicing one's disappointment, one should calmly ask what does Estonia need, what can we still achieve and how hard are we willing to work for it.

According to President Ilves, making choices entails daily answers to simple questions:

"Either any kind of academic education for as many as possible, or world-class academic education for the best and good, contemporary vocational training for all who are interested? Either a first-rate highway with junctions, noise barriers and wildlife crossings at the pace of 6 kilometres a year and 5 million euros per kilometre or simpler solutions that can be implemented more quickly?

Either new embassies and diplomats in emerging states across the world or reinforcements in neighbouring markets that are economically important to ourselves and Brussels?

Either new, yet uniform municipal units with old tasks or old, yet varying municipalities and towns whose roles have been rethought according to today's conditions?

Either solidary uniformity in taxes and subsidies or a more complex system based on needs?"

As we can see, the choice is not between right and wrong, bad and worse; we must make choices that best suit our current capabilities and needs, the Head of State said.

"Estonia cannot afford to squander. That includes the squandering of people's energy. Let us not seek the path of least resistance. Let's make Estonia greater and set it right," President Ilves said in the conclusion of his opening speech at the "Estonia as a Small Country" conference.

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