

Honourable legislature, Riigikogu,

I stand here today to keep the promise I made publicly last year on November 21st. I made this promise at the meeting in Kadriorg's Ice Cellar where representatives of the voluntary sector, politicians from parliamentary parties and experts of constitutional law agreed to initiate what later became known as the Rahvakogu or Popular Assembly. The aim of this joint initiative was to gather ideas on how to enliven political competition, strengthen the voters' voice, enable participation in politics in-between elections, prevent compulsory party membership, and make the financing of political parties more honest.

I called upon everyone to think about these issues, to make suggestions and to voice their opinion by email or post, and in private or public debates.

Now this has been done. The ideas of everyone who wished to contribute have been gathered together and systematised. They have been discussed on a number of occasions and their impact has been assessed. A representative selection of Estonian people assembled on Saturday to discuss these ideas, and they made public their preferences and the result of their deliberations. I stand here to pass on the result of this common effort to the Riigikogu. For, as repeatedly emphasised, only the Riigikogu can decide on whether to make these proposals into law.

I would like to thank everyone who has taken part in the process. Especially those Estonians who demonstrated interest and readiness to participate in debating public issues. I also appreciate the voluntary sector's demonstration of its ability to propose quick solutions effectively. I am pleased that political parties cooperated honestly with the rest of the voluntary sector in this joint project. This permits us to hope that at least when it comes to Estonia's worries related to political competition, this issue will find a solution soon.

True, the whole process as well as the form and substance of Saturday's deliberations have received ambivalent evaluations.

I repeat: the Popular Assembly is not an alternative decision-making organ to the Riigikogu, one that would compete with it and oppose itself to the Parliament. It is an additional opportunity in our developing democratic state that seeks new solutions in order to give real meaning to popular concepts such as "participation" and "involvement".

There are also various opinions about the results of the Popular Assembly's work. For many, it is too little, too late. Or on the contrary, too much, too soon.

In my opinion, all this deserves a thorough and public debate both in the Parliament's Constitutional Committee, in the party factions, as well as here in front of the full House.

One of the reasons for creating the Popular Assembly was that in the opinion of many active Estonian citizens the parliament and the political parties represented in it have been too slow to understand the nature and extent of change in society. That our party system is too encapsulated and regulated by laws favouring large and existing parties. That entering the political stage has been made difficult and expensive for newcomers due to various benchmark criteria. That in between elections citizens lack the possibility to really and substantially participate in the political decision-making process. That the relation between the result of elections and money spent on campaigns is too close.

In order to understand the work of the Popular Assembly it may be useful to take a look at the work of Stanford University's distinguished scientist, James Fishkin, which among other things demonstrates that the method used by the Popular Assembly is much more precise at mapping the people's opinion than any other opinion poll. At the same time, we see that there is no single will of the people, a single truth and irrefutably right way to do things, a way that politicians who seek cheap popularity claim to know and flaunt. The people are made up of individuals. Our people, the same people upon whose shoulders Estonia rests, are clever and diverse. Only in a joint debate is it possible to establish which opinions are held in common and where differences remain. No one alone thinks or feels for everyone.

Dear members of parliament,

Estonia has often been highlighted as having been able to react flexibly and swiftly, according to some even in an exemplary way, to the changes in the world economy and in our financial

position. I recall that it became possible to make radical budget cuts due to rarely seen internal political cooperation. And I have recognised the Riigikogu for this repeatedly.

And now, let us ask – how does the accepting of the sober reality in budgetary policy differ from the fact that we must take into account the public's wish to enliven political competition and to increase the possibilities to participate in politics in between elections?

Is it because the economic decisions were forced upon us by the surrounding harsh reality that did not depend on us? Why couldn't we critically evaluate what has been done from time to time without any outside pressure to do so, and change laws that no longer agree with the new reality and greater expectations?

This does not mean anything wrong was done years ago when laws were written and adopted. There have been entirely reasonable arguments for the guarantee deposit level required for candidates to the Riigikogu, for the election threshold, as well as for the minimum requirement of members to establish a political party. Now, however, would be the time to discuss all this again. To once again consider arguments both for and against, and make a decision corresponding to today's needs and society's expectations.

Honourable Riigikogu,

To conclude with possibly the most important thing: We know that the Popular Assembly is not the issue; it is the atmosphere and mood surrounding us. We can demonstrate and rationally prove that according to many objective criteria Estonia has never done as well as today.

Yet the functioning of a state and society is never mere mathematics or economics. An efficient representative democracy works when the people's discontent and proposals are also taken into account in-between elections. When the parliament is considered to be ours and an assembly of people like us. When the citizen truly sees members of parliament as their representatives, not as members of a political party who belong either to the governing coalition or the opposition.

Maive Rute from the European Commission's Directorate General for Research and Innovation recently pointed out that all successful states reach a certain crisis point when they have become wealthy enough. Expectations change. People's primary needs have been satisfied, wherefore people are no longer content with what they have.

In some countries, as in South Korea and Taiwan, it brought about a revolution. In Chile and Spain a conceptual change in the value system.

In Estonia this threshold – GDP per capita of 15 000 dollars – arrived in 2012.

I agree with Maive Rute when she claims that we are also living through an important change in our value system. A number of things that five or ten years ago brought votes at elections are today looked upon with a smile. Especially among those we consider to be the guarantee of our future – among the broad-minded and well-educated youth.

Estonian society demands an open debate; it wants to be a real and substantial participator in this process.

I ask you, honourable members of the Riigikogu, to take the Popular Assembly's proposals seriously.

Thank you.