

Address of the President of the Republic at the opening of the IV session of the XIII Riigikogu
12 September 2016

Honourable members of the Riigikogu,

In opening your new working year I begin where I left off in this very chamber in April 2009, at the session dedicated to the 90th anniversary of the Constituent Assembly – by calling on you to bolster our parliamentarianism every single day, since there can never be such a thing as too much of a sense of responsibility or statesmanship.

At the time I remarked that when Estonia, as a state and as a nation, had acted with representative democracy as its ideal, we had done quite well for ourselves; and that when the country has diverted from this course, we had fared quite poorly.

The same is true of the rest of the world. Wherever Montesquieu's idea of the separation of powers fails to take root, wherever a pseudo-parliament is rubber-stamped by the executive authority, wherever the courts are a puppet of the executive authority and decide which historical events actually took place and which did not, democracy is in a bad way.

Though considered cumbersome, costly and slow by many, parliamentarianism – the true parliamentary system – is to me the fairest and most reliable way of making decisions and forming government; the one that takes the greatest number of interests into account.

Of course, not every representative of the people can or indeed needs to be liked by everyone. And some, needless to say, fan the flames of criticism themselves, whether that be because of driving under the influence, their use of expense allowances or child support more broadly.

But as before, I fail to understand those who take the President of the Republic to task each

year for inviting every member of the Riigikogu to the reception marking the anniversary of our statehood. The heads of state of Estonia have been doing this on 24 February ever since the country's independence was restored, and I hope that the next president continue this tradition, which serves to emphasise parliamentary democracy – and that he or she agrees with me in my replacing the royal protocol, where unelected foreign diplomats greeted the head of state before the elected representatives of our country, with the protocol of a republic.

By recognising the parliament as an institution and parliamentarianism as a principle we in no way compromise on our justified exactingness when it comes to the Riigikogu elected by the highest power in the state. Because it is not the government that decides for the parliament, but the legislative authority that stands as the executive branch. That is the very nature of parliamentarianism.

In exactly the same way that we want the executive authority to explain its decisions and for independent court rulings to be understandable to ordinary citizens, so voters want to comprehend the choices made in the parliament.

This is particularly important at present, at a time when in public debate – here in Estonia as well as elsewhere in Europe and on the other side of the Atlantic – facts often no longer count, being ignored or rejected, and lies are being utilised as arguments. For me this is part of the personal responsibility of every member of the Riigikogu: every time you press one of those buttons, regardless of which colour it is, your choice affects 1.3 million people outside of this chamber; and your word, your explanation, should fulfil the same role.

You know what awaits the Riigikogu in the working year ahead: the state of the health insurance fund and ensuring that medical help is always available to our aging society; guaranteeing the competitiveness of Estonian agriculture even in difficult times; kick-starting the economy; people's ability to cope; having the public sector represented in counties and ensuring that life continues in rural centres; arguments over there being only four population centres; administrative reform and the future of state reform in general; possible changes to taxation policy and shaping excise duty rates that take our surrounding region into account; the integration of refugees; e-Estonia and ensuring that high-speed Internet reaches more people.

And alongside all of these issues you must deal with what I consider by and large to be even more important: foreign and security policy matters. These range from the impact of Brexit to the future of the European Union; from Europe's security situation, which remains as

complicated as ever, to the ongoing migration crisis. And all of this against the backdrop of the spread of populism.

It goes without saying that this list is not exhaustive. The parliament of Estonia, which belongs to both the European Union and NATO, deals with everything that surrounds us and influences us, here at home and further afield. Figuratively speaking, everything is on the table before you, from issues related to the presidency of the European Union to the restriction of driving exam options in regional centres.

That is the role of a parliament in a parliamentary state, which is also characterised by sensible cooperation between the governing coalition and the opposition, as well as communicating with the voluntary sector on an everyday basis. A strong and, if needed, vocal civil society that draws attention to bottlenecks will never replace a parliament, but supports the parliament in a functioning democracy and is very much needed.

Honourable members of the Riigikogu,

Two weeks ago, in accordance with the Constitution, elections for the next President of the Republic were held here in the parliament in three rounds, unfortunately without success. In less than two weeks the electoral body will gather, and politicians and journalists are already saying that there is no guarantee a president will be elected there either, with everything coming back to the Riigikogu.

I doubt whether this would amount to a constitutional crisis. It would, however, go against the grain of the Constitution. It would also damage the credibility of authority – in its broadest sense – and weaken the starting position of the new head of state. Because such a result would only be grist to the mill of those who see nothing but dodgy deals and secret agreements everywhere in politics.

However, I do not agree that the procedure for the election of the president should fundamentally change. The authority of the president in a parliamentary state does not support their direct election. In such a case a president with no executive power would have a direct mandate, whereas the executive power itself – the government – would only have an indirect mandate. This almost always leads to instability in government, or at the very least to serious

issues of competence.

Someone who is unknown to the public is not elected president in Estonia. As such, talk of when their nomination is officially registered is unimportant. The passionate debates among candidates in recent months confirm this.

I do call on you to consider, however, whether the second round of the electoral body's voting should end one way or the other with the election of the president. This would mean that the candidate who received the most votes was elected, not the current requirement, which sees the candidate elected who is supported by the majority of those who take part in the vote. This could not be done without amending the Constitution, but the aim of doing so would be to significantly reduce the potential for games with blank or spoilt ballot papers.

To date, the President of the Republic has been elected four times – in 1996, 2001, 2006 and 2011 – as the provisions and principles of the Constitution prescribe. Those who have attempted to use presidential elections as a kind of beauty contest for their party or a particular individual have failed. The Estonian Constitution does not view presidential elections as a beauty contest or as an entertainment programme involving a drawing competition, but as a public agreement between parties to elect a head of state.

I have not concealed the fact that I considered it right for the next President of the Republic to be elected in the Riigikogu. The political agreement between parties that was required to achieve this did not eventuate. In the electoral body, such an agreement should be inevitable.

We need an agreement in order to elect a president who has political support appropriate to a parliamentary state, who is aware of what is required of the head of state according to the Constitution and who, with their experience and their understanding, champions Estonia at home and abroad.

The candidates for the presidency are broadly speaking already known. I sincerely hope that in the electoral body we do not see a constant recalculating of allegiances, candidates being voted against rather than voted for or cheap point-scoring to boost ratings, but statesmanlike decision-making; that we will see the electoral body agree, as they are required to do, to choose the next President of the Republic on 24 September. And that choice will without doubt be the

right one.

I wish you well in your work.