



**The European Movement's Rule of Law Discussion
12th of July 2017, at the European Parliament in Brussels
Key Note Speech**

by the Minister of Justice of the Republic of Estonia Mr. Urmas Reinsalu

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased and honoured to stand before you today on behalf of the Estonian Presidency to open this discussion on the importance of ensuring the rule of law in today's Europe and into the future.

I am pleased because today's events show that there are so many different stakeholders, from the institutions, the Member States and civil society, who continue to recognise the value of the rule of law and who want to ensure that the rule of law remains strong as one of the tenets upon which the European Union is built. So many of you are gathered here, and earlier today the Estonian Presidency held a Rule of Law seminar at our Permanent Representation in preparation for the annual Rule of Law dialogue in the Council.

I am honoured because I stand here before you in the home of the European Parliament, which together with the parliaments of the Member States plays such an important role in ensuring that the exercise of public authority is not only based on law, but also adheres to the law. This effort is highly appreciated.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I assure you that Estonia knows the value of the rule of law.

The restoration of Estonia's independence 26 years ago hinged upon the rule of law – the recognition by the international community that the Republic of Estonia had never ceased to exist *de jure* during more than 50 years of occupation. Next year, it is with the greatest joy that we will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the



Republic of Estonia - after we conclude the very first Estonian Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

In its programme, the Estonian Presidency has confirmed its commitment to the principles of democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights.

For one, we remember how valuable the guidance of the Council of Europe and of the European Union was in helping us to rebuild our society and state in full respect of the rule of law and fundamental rights. But no less importantly, we also remember what it meant to live under a state that on paper had a very impressive constitution and laws full of principles and rights guarantees but which functioned in a parallel reality that respected neither. We haven't forgotten that citizens of the Soviet Union were guaranteed freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom of assembly – but that these guarantees were worthless, as they were neither real nor upheld. We know all too well, that the existence of treaty provisions, legislation, case law and principles is only half of the picture.

This knowledge is part of what drives our digital agenda – such as our commitment to providing equal and easy access to government services, access to justice, transparency in the legislative process, transparency in government and giving citizens control over the use of their personal data. Rights and principles cannot exist only on paper – they also have to function in the real world. We firmly believe that the rule of law is not only the responsibility of states, but of the citizens as well. The more transparent the state, the more citizens know about how the state functions and what it is doing, the more they can contribute to democracy and also protect it. We are proud of the transparent society and government that we are building, with digital solutions that provide quick access to information on all stages of the legislative process and on the judgments of the courts, as well as simplified communication between citizens and government authorities – all of which help to ensure transparent, honest government and the rule of law. As with so many other areas of life, the future of the rule of law is – at least partly – digital.

Our understanding of the importance of the rule of law is also why we welcome initiatives such as today's discussion.

It is important that we affirm our commitment to make full use of the potential of the different instruments and expertise, for example within the EU institutions, the Council of Europe and its Venice Commission, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights and numerous NGOs which contribute to the monitoring of the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights in our Member States. Estonia also welcomes the interparliamentary dialogue which will allow the parliaments of Europe to



promote the rule of law even more effectively – and to help to make sure that the rule of law in the European Union remains real, both in theory and in practice.

As the Presidency, we are committed to strengthening the annual rule of law dialogue in the Council and ensuring a meaningful debate in the General Affairs Council later this year. To this end, earlier today the Estonian Presidency held an informal expert seminar on Media Pluralism and the Rule of Law in the Digital Age to help identify what different actors – such as the Member States, the EU institutions, NGOs and media companies – can do to ensure the credibility of information, trust in the media and accurately informed political debate in the digital age. The importance of a pluralistic, independent and trustworthy media as a guardian and watchdog of democracy and the rule of law cannot be underestimated. If confidence in the media is lost, it will be difficult to restore – and this has the potential to undermine the media’s ability to fulfil its vital role.

We believe that the European Parliament and the Council share the view that media pluralism and trust in the media are essential safeguards and prerequisites for properly functioning democracies. We are very pleased that so many different stakeholders, including Julia Laffranque, judge at the European Court of Human Rights, representatives from the institutions and NGOs as well as members of the European Parliament Marju Lauristin and Henna Virkkunen participated in the panels at the Estonian Presidency seminar, and that a number of members of the European Parliament and many NGOs were in attendance to enrich the discussions today.

It is up to all of us -- the legislators, executive and judiciary in the Member States, civil society, international organisations, the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Court of Justice and the Council – each within our area of competence to uphold the common values to which we are committed in the EU.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Some of you may know that Estonians can be quite reserved and that we often live by one of our most well-known sayings – Rääkimine hõbe, vaikimine kuld – which translates into “Talking is silver, but silence is golden.”

But we do actually know that this is not always the case. As we noted at the Presidency seminar earlier today, informed, trustworthy information and constructive debate and dialogue are key to the political process, are key to the



functioning of democracy and are key to ensuring respect for fundamental rights and the rule of law in our societies.

I wish you all a constructive and fruitful discussion in looking for ways to ensure the rule of law in Europe in the present day and well into the future.

Thank you for you attention!

