**President of the Republic
At the Plenary** [**Meeting of the LVIII COSAC**](http://www.cosac.eu/58-estonia-2017/) **27th of November 2017**

Speaker of *Riigikogu*, Mr Eiki Nestor,

Mr Barnier,

Mrs Hübner,

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you in Tallinn for the Plenary Meeting of EU’s Parliaments EU Committees (COSAC) meeting. This is one of the biggest events of our EU Council Presidency here in Estonia. In slightly more than a month, the active part of the Presidency has finished. The people who have been engaged with the Presidency both here in Estonia and in Brussels, can finally relax and enjoy their Christmas holidays. But of course we will remain firm supporters and cheerleaders for the next Presidencies, Bulgaria and Austria, our trio partners.

184 days to solve all the challenges that Europe faces is not a long time. It is not yet the time to look back to our ongoing Presidency and make conclusions. But our overarching aim – breaking the ice of negativity about our Union – seems to be really happening.

The hard work on common security policy approach is reaping the results. The digital agenda has focused the minds of policymakers on the fact that important part of people`s and businesses` activities takes place online and the governments have a certain obligation to facilitate and protect in the cybersphere. The four freedoms we enjoy in analogue will be expanded into digital domain, while many countries experiment with different ways of service provision over internet.

Finance ministries have gathered to look at the taxation consequences of such a change where most interactions leading to transactions, purchases of goods and services, have some part in cyberspace. We have sorted the posted workers directive, but what will we do with people who work in different countries over internet?

We have complained about companies headquartering in one country, acting in other, but what about digital nomads who will do the same as independent operators? Who will be their social security network provider?

If all people check web doctors to understand their health anyway, how to then make sure they have good, science-based tools to do so? Can Africa become a common market with whom Europe can trade and deal as a union, can Europe co-operate with African Union (AU) and attack the root causes of the migration, otherwise known as brain drain in the African countries? Can some Eastern Partners expect ever closer co-operation with EU, if their democratic processes continue to develop?

These questions may or may not already have answers, but they have come up and in the case of Africa will come up in Cote D´Ivoire this week, through different Presidency organised events time and again. But these are not hand-wringing in despair questions. These are looking-to-the-future questions. Not problems. Opportunities. Grasping these opportunities demands collective, yet flexible and relative quick action.

I am not going to complain about difficult and long decision-making chains in Europe. If we had to unify our continent based on something less than European Union, it would be impossible. I have seen during our Presidency as well that with high stakes we come to decisions quite quickly. Just sometimes there is not the feeling of urgency I wish we had, particularly when dealing with e-Health, common and cross-border identification needs for all EU people in internet. We must grasp the urgency, our people and our businesses need us to do so. This is how we can turn our competitive advantage of cross-border management system of a whole continent into economic and social benefits to our people.

Brexit and the populist voices within Europe have made discussions about EU’s future relevant again. After the low point in 2016, it is now safe to state that EU does have a future, I hope we will use this revived faith to insert some urgency into our decision making, because otherwise the impetus might wane again. The public support has risen and we now have to respond to the hopes of our people. We need to think first and foremost of our citizens and ask ourselves a question – are we ready for being bold and future orientated or we stay in our comfort zone and play it safe. I hope that politicians will not opt for the easiest of the roads ahead.

A number of ideas have already been put forward by the President of the Commission Mr Juncker and by President Macron of France. So what should in the light of these proposals be our course of action?

We need to create jobs and enhance growth. Embrace technological innovation and transformation in order to stay ahead of the curve. To commit ourselves to strengthen internal and external security as well as completing the Single Market with a sustainable social dimension, embracing technological developments of our societies and increasing Europe’s competitiveness. But this is only one side of the coin.

We need at the same time, as laid out in President Macron’s “Initiative for Europe”, to reinvigorate the debate on Europe’s future and find ways to meet today’s challenges collectively and successfully.

I understand that quite often big and bold ideas require, on top of political decisions, resources. This brings me to the next Multinational Financial Framework (MFF) which will be because of Brexit approximately 20% smaller. At the same time, the things we want to achieve are numerous. We should approach the MFF negotiations first and foremost as Europeans. Most of us would agree that there is value added in acting together in research and innovation. Science is far too big for one country to sustain. As I say here, even in Estonia – a chronic overachiever in capturing R&D finance of the EU Budget – the scientists could turn all state budget into research results. We need money for defence sector innovation, as common R&D will in the future deliver us a more common European defence technology. We need to invest into cross-border infrastructure, be it transport or energy. The same applies for the foreign and security policy. Going for it alone rarely pays off these days. There is also added value on acting together on cohesion. Everybody wins if we reduce differences between regions.

For all that, we must carefully comb through our current portfolio of expenditure, and remove as much as possible what is not respecting the principle of subsidiarity. Spending from the 1% of GDP budget on projects and activities which have no cross-border effect should be seriously limited. Better respect for the principle of subsidiarity will create in itself much space for solidarity in our budget. Estonia might not be against rising the budget ceilings as well, but only if the budget can be reoriented considerably into providing financing to the areas where we can not go it alone.

Then there is the question how to bring Europe closer to its citizens. A topic you will be discussing later on. An area where you as politicians of your respective countries have a role to play. Responsible national policies can result in the recognition of EU’s values by the wider public. It is important to give the EU its due recognition for the possibilities it offers. Though there has been a boost to EU’s support in many countries, it is still wavering in a number of Member States and this is often happening because of the political messaging about it. It is very difficult on the one hand to criticize the EU and at the same time to claim that, it is useful. The problem is not that people get the EU wrong. Rather that they get confusing and incoherent messages about it.

First, EU is not and will not be understandable for every citizen. It will also not be helping every citizen. Its role is to provide stable conditions, according to pre-agreed rules, for Member State politicians to come together and act in the benefit of our people. These actions are enablers for Member States' governments, in order to support their aim in providing for their people, providing growth, jobs, social security. We must not blame EU if Member States' governments get their redistributional policies like education, health care or social support, somehow wrong. It is not EU`s responsibility.

Yet we know that EU`s reputation also depends on how good Member State`s own policy-making is. This way, EU will always be held hostage to the delivery of the Member States' governments. Even if we all managed somehow to avoid blaming the EU for our own mistakes, people want to see that EU-enabled actions work in their benefit. And only Member States' governments can make them work.

European Union is not of course perfect, but it is short sighted to blame it for every single problem we face as a Member State or the Union of 28, soon Union of 27.

I do believe that Europe's citizens, your voters, have high expectations where we are headed. And you have a role, that cannot be underestimated, to play. Europe doesn't start or end in the corridors of EU institutions / Brussels. It starts in your constituencies. And you have all the tools in your disposal to continue to make a difference.

I firmly believe that we all have a lot to gain from the wellbeing of the European Union. I hope that today’s discussions here in Tallinn will contribute to the reinvigoration of the debate on Europe’s future. In doing so think of yourselves not only as politicians of your home countries but equally as Europeans.

Thank you!