

**Speech by Ms Helmen Kütt, Head of the Estonian Delegation to IPU
at the 134th IPU Assembly
Lusaka, 19-23 March 2016
Rejuvenating Democracy, Giving Voice to the Youth**

Good afternoon. Thank you to all the speakers for sharing their perspective on the important issue of democracy and the youth.

We are right to worry when public confidence in democratic institutions is rather low – and falling – in many places around the world. However, instead of spending a lot of time trying to figure out the exact reasons behind this, we should focus on the future of democracy. Our world is rapidly changing, but I am certain that the future of democracy is bright. The idea that power needs to be vested in the people is timeless. What is being modified is the way we – and especially the youth – relate to democracy, and participate in the democratic processes.

Before talking about the participation of the Estonian youth in political processes, I will say a few words about the general state of democracy in Estonia. In the past 25 years, the Estonian political system and society have undergone enormous transformations, and the country has grown into a strong democratic republic that respects the rule of law, human rights, and the ideas of tolerance and equal opportunities.

Estonia is a country of just 1.3 million people, and most Estonians are proud and thankful for their country, as well as for the ability to decide on their own future. Participation at the last general elections was 64.2 percent, a small increase from the previous years. By general standards, participation rate of 64 percent is not bad, but it definitely could – and should – be higher. However, while participation rate at elections is an important indicator of citizens' commitment to the future of their country, it is not the only one. For instance, in Estonia, we are currently seeing the civil society expand and strengthen. As parliamentarians, we need to make sure that we embrace it as a partner rather than seeing it as a competitor.

Young people up to the age of 26 make up 32 % of the Estonian population. As in many other places around the world, many young Estonians consider themselves not only citizens of Estonia, but also citizens of the world. It is obvious that when a government does not pay enough attention to young people, fails to improve their quality of life, makes them feel like

they are treated unfairly, or that their country does not need them, the consequences for the country can be serious. Disappointed and dissatisfied young people often exclude themselves from the democratic and political processes. In addition, given the ease of travelling, they can leave the country altogether and start their lives somewhere else. I am proud that in the recent years the youth have been a priority for the Estonian government. Of course, there is a lot more to be done, but active labor market policies have successfully targeted the youth and have helped us to lower youth unemployment (ages 15 to 24) from 39.2 percent in 2010 to 15 percent in 2015.

Two years ago, a group of young Estonians from a youth NGO proposed that the voting age at the local elections should be lowered from 18 to 16 years, because it would give young people a stronger incentive for actively participating in political processes, and make them feel like their opinions count. Estonian parliament approved this proposal. So in 2017, there will be 24,000 new voters, who otherwise would have had to wait for two more years. Furthermore, many youth NGOs are working with these young people to make sure they not only go to vote and know that voting is important, but that they will be able to make an informed decision when choosing between the candidates.

When considering innovative ideas on how to better involve young people in the democratic processes, it is important to remember the power that technology has on the younger generations. Democracy at its best is as representative of the people as possible, and therefore low turnouts at elections undermine the democratic system. To tackle this problem, Estonia – which has been known for its e-government and advanced e-services for a long time – emerged as a pioneer of internet voting. Our e-voting system is based on our microchip-equipped ID-cards, and guarantees full reliability and confidentiality. A voter can vote in a matter of minutes, regardless of their location. In 2007, 5.5 percent of Estonians voted online, in 2015 this figure had increased to 30.5 percent, and votes came in from 116 different countries around the world. E-voting was by no means a solution that the government developed with just the young people in mind, but it has considerably increased their rate of participation.

Another important format for involving the youth are different workshops, forums, and simulations that not only teach the young people the theory of democratic processes, but also give them an opportunity to try everything out on their own. For instance, next week, 120

Estonian students from 9th to 11th grade will gather at the Estonian Parliament to act out a Plenary Session of the European Parliament. This is something the students have spent weeks preparing for. These hands-on experiences allow students to talk about important political topics with their peers, and see issues from the perspective of the decision-makers. At their best, these programs will give the young people a lifelong habit of voting – and an understanding that the opportunity to vote is not just a right, but also a responsibility.

Democracy can only be strong if all the segments of the society are involved in an active and meaningful way. Young people are tomorrow's decision-makers and leaders, which is why their participation in the democratic processes is particularly important. We need to make use of the opportunities that technology provides, to make it easier for people to take part in the democratic processes. However, although voting online is much easier than casting your vote at the ballot box, we cannot grow complacent. Democracy must never be taken for granted. It needs continuous efforts and commitment from us all.

Dear colleagues, I wish you great success in your important work, in engaging with the youth and leading by example, and in strengthening democracy around the world.

Thank you very much.