

Speech of **Ms Maris Lauri**, Head of the IPU Estonia group at the General Debate
“Harnessing science, technology and innovation (STI) for a more peaceful and sustainable future”.

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Distinguished Chair, dear colleagues, honourable hosts!

Estonia is a firm believer of integrating science, technology and innovation into everyday life. The digital society has been seamlessly integrated into Estonia's daily life, becoming both a hallmark of our international success and a driver of economic growth. With its modern system of e-governance and widely praised digital services, like e-voting and online tax returns, Estonia proves that setting high goals and being persistent can bring superior results.

Of course, we want more and technology advances. Hence, we are developing new systems and services, upgrading the old ones, and of course learning from other countries.

We as politicians play a crucial role in bringing the state closer to our citizens. If they are spending more time on the internet, then the public sector should use the possibilities. The digital public sector not only enhances transparency and accountability but also makes political processes more accessible and inclusive, leading to policies that better reflect the needs of the citizens.

Estonia is the first country to use e-voting for all elections. It increases the participation rates in the groups which are with higher mobility rates, like young and professionals, but also those with low mobility possibilities, like pensioners or disabled.

Naturally, innovation and use of new technologies does not come without risks.

We are continuously adapting the latest technology to the service of our free societies, supporting democracies and educate our people regardless of their age to successfully tackle contemporary challenges. We should acknowledge that by doing so, our countries will become more resilient against hostile actors in the era of hybrid warfare, as well as better prepared to face various risks.

Information warfare has become an almost integral part of our lives. Attacks on democracy are not only getting more frequent, but also more exhaustive. Evidence based information is constantly being challenged by artificially generated materials and we must beware to not fall into its traps. Deepfake – thoroughly created AI photos and videos of people and places we know, including politicians and world leaders – is here to stay and it's our duty as a society to tackle it.

We need to improve our media and information literacy, understand the importance of cyber hygiene, recognize threats, false information and manipulation. Media literacy is crucial in the democratic system, since public opinion is often shaped by media narratives. This is where we are most vulnerable to information warfare.

Fake news often exploits existing social divides, intensifying polarization and increasing instability between communities.

Specific groups - young and women particularly - are often targeted to frighten and silence them. We see increasingly that fraudsters and those aiming to undermine civil societies and democracy are working globally.

Hence the most effective way is to work together.

Fortunately, there are innumerable good practices to tackle these challenges.

In Estonia, perhaps one the most effective measure has been restricting the disinformation narratives. Since February 2022, Estonia has restricted access to 53 Russian TV channels and 307 websites that were agitating for war. To ensure that local Russian speakers could access factual information of their interest and have a space for democratic debate, Estonian Government supported independent Estonian media outlets in creating and enhancing content in Russian language.

Additionally, our government, media and NGOs cooperate to expose influence origins, activities and methods to offer factual information and enhance societal resilience. For example, Internal Security Service, Foreign Intelligence Service, Information System Authority and others publish annual reviews and if possible, openly communicate on influence operations targeting Estonia.

Similarly, NGOs and media outlets do regular research on disinformation and raise public awareness on media literacy. We have several regular fact-checking teams exposing deliberate disinformation and potential foreign influence on specific campaigns.

This is especially effective, as it helps bring the fight against disinformation into simpler terms that most readers can easily understand. In Estonia, the public trust in democratic institutions and media is high which helps in raising societal resilience to information manipulations coming from abroad.

Disinformation is not only a challenge for Estonia, but for all of us in the democratic world. It is not only a threat to our security and stability, but to our dignity and humanity as a whole. We cannot afford to ignore it, to tolerate it, however we should not let it stop us from creating more accessible and engaging public sector and digital spaces. Let us commit to digital future and ensure we acquire the skills necessary to minimize the threats and increase the political participation of all our citizens.

Thank you for your attention!