

Estonian experience from the Riigikogu

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**“Ethics in Contemporary
Parliamentarism”**

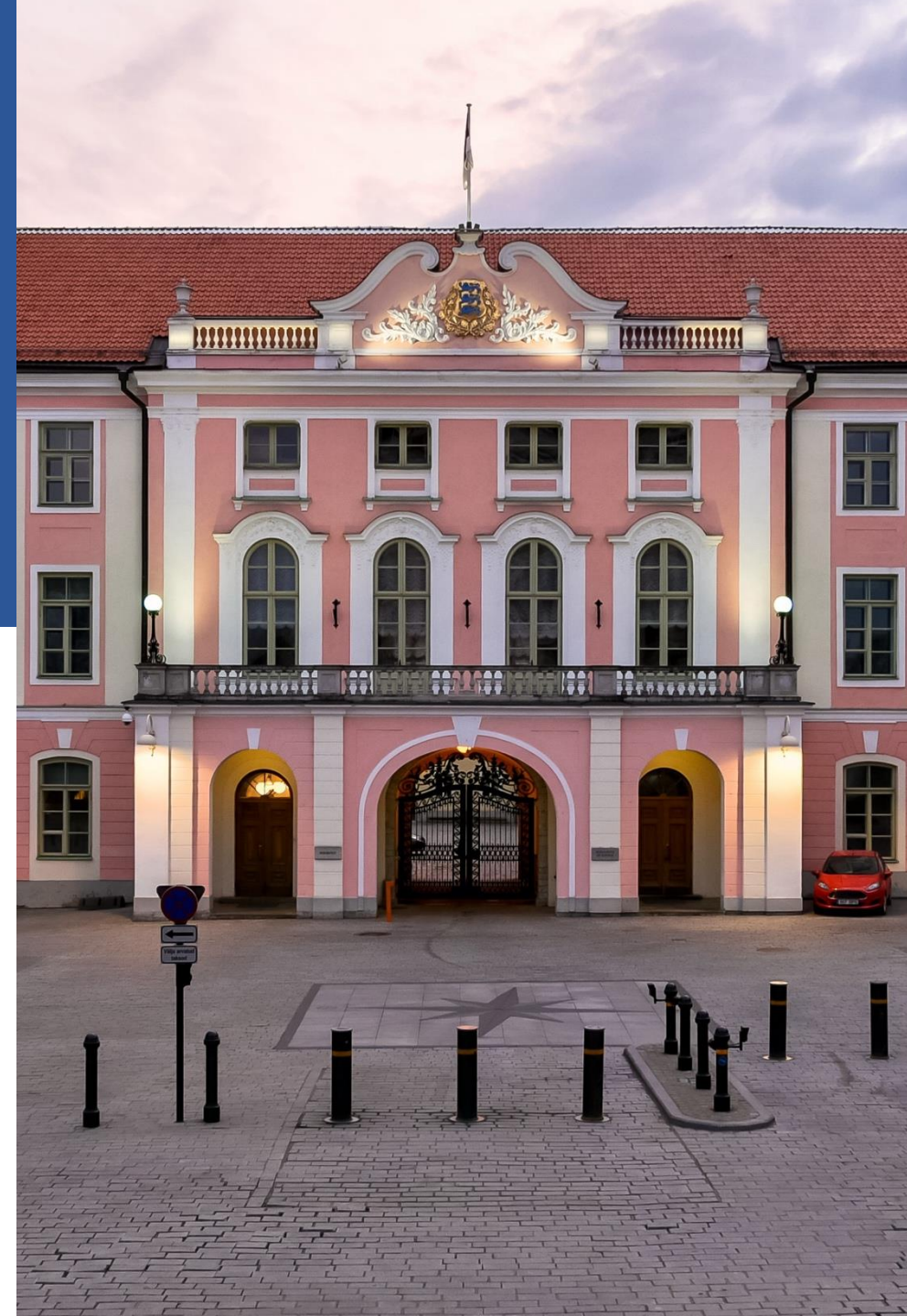
Riga, 21 April, 2026



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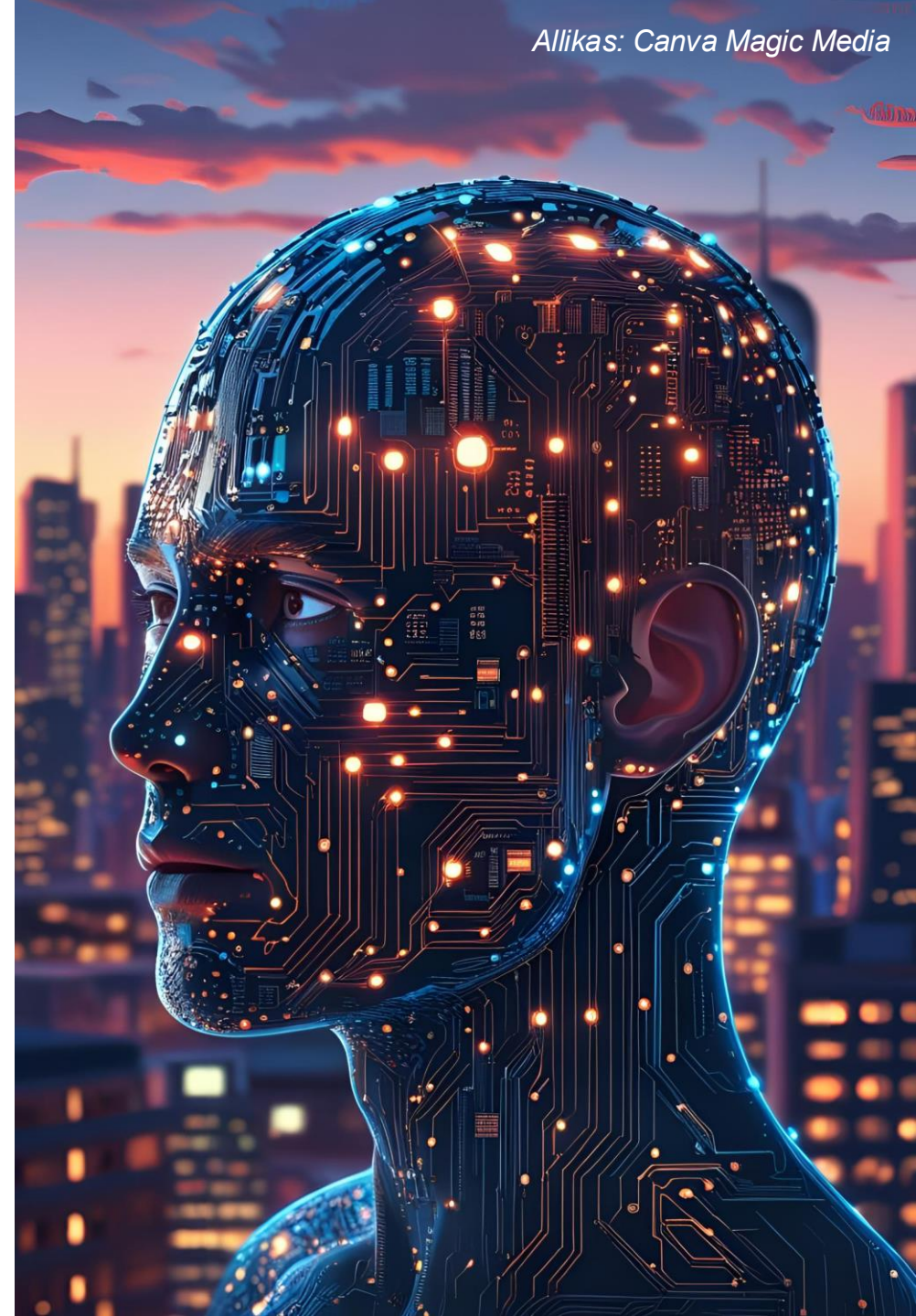


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Questions

- How do we balance freedom of expression with responsibility and the protection of others from harm?
- Should Members of Parliament apply the same ethical standards on social media as in their other public activities?
- What sanctions should exist for ethical violations, and do they actually work?



Freedom of expression

- Members of Parliament must enjoy broad freedom of expression.
- But that freedom is not only a personal right.
- It is also a public responsibility.
- MPs are holders of democratic office.
- That is why the same ethical standards should apply both offline and online.

Politics exists because people disagree

- Politicians disagree about liberty, equality, justice, dignity, security, tradition, solidarity. The task is to handle disagreement well.
- Democracy does not give elected representatives a licence to humiliate, degrade, intimidate, or incite hostility.
- There is a difference between robust disagreement and abusive conduct.
- **The test question is: did the speech contribute to democratic debate, or did it undermine dignity, trust, and the quality of democratic life itself?**

Responsibility

- Political ethics is not identical with private morality.
- MPs may have different personal convictions, different worldviews, and different moral intuitions.
- But by accepting public office, they also accept **role-based ethical responsibilities**.
- They are expected to act not only as private persons, but as representatives of the **public interest**.

Good Practice Guidelines of Members of the Riigikogu (approved on 17.12.2014)

A Member of the Riigikogu should:

- act in the interests of the people and the state,
- avoid damaging the reputation of Estonia and the Riigikogu,
- remain respectful and courteous toward colleagues and fellow citizens,
- avoid inappropriate language,
- disclose relevant interests,
- and explain the background of decisions and choices.

Trust is crucial

- Parliamentary ethics is not only about avoiding illegality or scandal.
- It is also about understanding the moral meaning of office.
- It is about **communication, restraint, openness, and trust**.
- When trust is low, public cynicism deepens.
- Capable and decent people may choose to stay out of politics altogether.
- Distrust in politicians can make democracy itself more fragile.

Social media

- ❖ **Should Members of Parliament apply the same ethical standards on social media as in their other public activities?**
- Yes, the same ethical standards should apply on social media, and in some respects they should apply **even more strictly** there.
- An MP does not stop being a public representative when posting from a personal account. The platform changes. The office does not.

Sanctions

❖ **What sanctions should exist for ethical violations, and do they actually work?**

- Sanctions are important. Rules without consequences are often ignored.
- MPs should not rely only on the limits of criminal law, but reflect and possess **an inner compass** appropriate to public office.
- Sanctions help draw a line. They show that some forms of conduct are incompatible with democratic office.

Why ethical culture of the parliament matters?

- Ethical conduct in politics does not depend only on personal virtue. It also depends on **institutional culture**.
- People can live by values only if institutions make that possible.
- Institutions change only when individuals are willing to question practices and reform them.
- ❖ **Parliamentary ethics is not only about personal conduct, but also about the ethical culture of parliament itself.**

Conclusions

- Our legal framework starts from a strong free mandate and strong protection of political speech.
- But our Good Practice also reminds us that public office carries obligations: **to act in the public interest, to remain respectful, to avoid inappropriate language, to preserve the credibility of parliament, and to explain one's decisions openly.**

Thank you for your attention!

Further reading:

Sutrop, Margit (2023). Ethics and Politics. In: Brand, Cordula; Ammicht-Quinn, Regina; Meisch, Simon (Ed.). »Ich lehne mich jetzt mal ganz konkret aus dem Fenster: [...]«. (87–96). Tübingen: Tübingen Library Publishing. DOI: 10.15496/publikation-83836.

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