

In memoriam: Tanel Kerikmäe



On August 1, 2025, Tallinn University of Technology (TalTech), the Department of Law and the Estonian legal community suffered a profound loss with the unexpected and premature passing of Professor Tanel Kerikmäe, director of the Department of Law. Many of us lost a very dear friend and young researchers a valued mentor. Professor Kerikmäe—Tanel—was a visionary, one of those rare persons with the ability to see around the corner, to anticipate relevant questions sometimes even before they are articulated. It is no coincidence that, at the time of his death, he was deeply involved in the legal aspects of artificial intelligence. Among his ongoing and sadly interrupted work were projects involving algorithms in conflict resolution, legal design, risks of bias or, instead, tools for improving access to justice through automation—the list could go on.

Tanel was a sought-after speaker at conferences, a visiting professor at universities around the world and an expert in governmental and other studies at the Estonian, European and global level. With Tanel, even a discussion that was supposed to deal with administrative and practical matters could turn into a brainstorming session, leading to a new exciting idea for research.

Tanel was part of the generation of Estonian lawyers who, at a very young age, lived through the transformation of Estonia from a Soviet-occupied authoritarian state to a reborn, modern European democracy. In his early career, he looked at issues related to the reconstruction of state after years of occupation, with the ensuing challenges such as property restitution. Soon his attention turned to European integration and the steps that Estonia needed to take to become a valued member of the European Union—and for the European Union to become a valued presence in Estonian society. In the early 2000s, his textbook on EU law was on the desks of most government officials and many private lawyers. In his PhD thesis, defended in 2009 at Tallinn University Institute of Political Science and Governance, he explored how a state can be a good EU member while still standing up for its convictions by looking at the protection of the rule of law through constitutional dialogue. Whether in the field of EU law or the challenges of technology and law, Tanel did not believe in convenient solutions or the ones that ruffled the fewest feathers, and instead looked for those that held the most promise for both progress and sustainability.

Throughout his career, Tanel sought out new challenges as well as continuity. He helped form a group of valued colleagues who worked together for years but at the same time was always on the lookout for promising new talent. This often meant encouraging young researchers but also attracting international colleagues to TalTech—or, indeed, colleagues from other departments of the University with whom tight research networks were formed. Tanel was one of the few academics who not only spoke about interdisciplinarity but truly practiced it! He also understood the importance of testing legal solutions in real contexts, promoting initiatives such as legal labs.

His curriculum vitae shows his positions at the University of Tartu, Concordia and Audentes private universities and, since 2009, at TalTech as the director of the Department of Law; his several guest or honorary professorships (in Ukraine, the Czech Republic, Singapore and Vietnam, to name a few); his supervision of doctoral and other students around the world; his role in many projects and high-quality publications.

Yet, this image of a successful and influential academic is still only a small part of the impression that he left on those of us who knew him. We remember a remarkable person who combined his wit and imagination to highlight relevant legal problems in such a way that it often became apparent only afterwards that the seemingly fun discussion actually addressed relevant questions! We remember an individual who dared to speak truth to power, even despite the discomfort it often entailed. We remember how generously

he shared his time, his knowledge and his contacts with students and younger colleagues, hoping and never fearing that they might step up and take his place in the future.

His place was vacated far too soon. Tanel had so much left to offer; yet with what he gave, his legacy will live on.

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