



# Latvia in the United Nations

# Latvia in the United Nations

# Latvia in the United Nations

## **LATVIA IN THE UNITED NATIONS**

Compiled and edited by Gunda Reire. Riga: Publishing House “Zinātne”, 2025

The opinions and the accuracy of the facts in this book are the sole responsibility of the authors. These opinions do not in any way reflect the official position or perspectives of the Chancery of the President of Latvia.

Project manager in charge of compilation: Gunda Reire

Graphic layout: Oskars Stalidzāns

Translator: Ieva Upmace-Grīviņa

English language editor: Tālis Archdeacon

Images used in the publication by: Alvis Dadzis, Dāvis Doršs, Dace Mažeika, Anete Annija Nežberte, Mārtiņš Plūme, Gatis Rozenfelds, Ilmārs Znotiņš, Rick Bajornas, Eskinder Debebe, Christian Donadeo, Mark Garten, Amanda Voisard. Images courtesy of archives of the Chancery of the President of Latvia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the State Chancellery, LETA, the International Court of Justice and personal archives; websites of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea and the International Law Commission.

This publication is protected by copyright. Reproduction or any unauthorised use shall constitute a copyright violation. Copyright violations shall be subject to liability pursuant to Section 148 of the Criminal Law of the Republic of Latvia.

© Authors of texts, 2025

© Oskars Stalidzāns, cover design, 2025

© Chancery of the President of Latvia, 2025

ISBN 978-9934-599-71-2

# Content

Introduction .....	7
<b>I. LATVIA'S CANDIDACIES AT THE UN</b> .....	9
<i>Edgars Rinkēvičs</i> . Latvia's Path to the UN Security Council .....	10
The Glass Ceiling Has Been Shattered. An Interview with <i>Vaira Viķe-Freiberga</i> .....	15
<i>Ilvija Pūce</i> . Elected Experts: A Glimpse into the Work of the UN Treaty Bodies .....	23
<b>II. LATVIA WITHIN THE UNITED NATIONS</b> .....	35
The Dynamics of Being an Ambassador at the UN in New York. Interview with <i>Jānis Mažeiks</i> .....	36
<i>Rīta Ruduša</i> . UNESCO: When Words and Values Collide .....	51
<i>Aīga Rūrāne</i> . Latvia and the Implementation of Global Health Goals .....	59
<i>Ilze Doškina</i> . UNICEF – the United Nations Children's Fund .....	71
<b>III. LATVIA AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY</b> .....	83
<i>Mārtiņš Drēģeris</i> . The Role of the United Nations in International Security and Latvia's Security .....	84
<i>Katrīna Kaktiņa</i> . Arms control, the United Nations, and Latvia .....	94
<i>Ance Baura</i> . The Road to the UN Security Council: Legal and Practical Aspects .....	104
<b>IV. LATVIA'S SPECIALISATION AT THE UN: INTERNATIONAL LAW AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS</b> .....	115
<i>Agnese Vilde</i> . Latvia's Contribution to the Gender Equality Agenda of the UN ...	116
<i>Kristīne Līce</i> . Settlement of International Disputes: What Good is the UN? .....	129
<i>Jānis Kārklīņš</i> . Latvia at the UN in Geneva .....	142

<b>V. LATVIA'S CONTRIBUTION TO MULTILATERALISM: GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT, THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS, AND PARTICIPATION IN INTERNATIONAL MISSIONS</b> .....	153
Human Rights Are the Answer to Grand Challenges.	
Interview with <i>Ilze Brands-Kehris</i> .....	154
<i>Alise Balode</i> . Latvia's Development Cooperation Policy .....	162
Notes on a First-Hand Experience in UN Operations.	
Interview with <i>Dainis Ozoliņš</i> .....	184
<b>VI. FUTURE PROSPECTS</b> .....	195
<i>Anete Biķe</i> . The United Nations and Youth .....	196
<i>Gunda Reire</i> . Mission Impossible: Reforming the UN Security Council .....	205
<i>Mārtiņš Pāparinskis</i> . The Future of International Law .....	218
About the Authors .....	232

# Introduction

This book was compiled while Latvia was busy campaigning for a seat on the 2026–2027 UN Security Council. This is a historic step as Latvia has never been an elected member of the UN Security Council.

The Security Council is the UN organ responsible for international peace and security. It is also the only institution in the world which authorises the use of military force. While the decisions of the UN Security Council are binding to all UN Member States, the Council justifiably garners criticism for its inability to reach these decisions. This is not the only paradox inherent to the United Nations. This book provides insight into both the glory and the downfalls of the UN, as well as the potential of this organisation, whose destiny is in the hands of its Member States.

The co-authors of this book are persons who were closely involved with Latvia's membership of the UN, either during the time of compiling this publication or in the period since the restoration of Latvia's independence. Among the authors are representatives of our diplomatic service, Latvian representatives and experts elected to UN structures, and representatives of the Chancery of the President of Latvia.

This book presents interviews and essays by Latvian professionals, officials and experts which demonstrate Latvia's contribution to strengthening the international community and multilateralism. Their first-hand accounts clearly show that Latvia's national specialisation within the UN has strong historical roots and is not simply part of its campaign to be elected to the Security Council. Since accession to the UN, Latvia has focused its expertise in primary areas such as international law, human rights, fundamental freedoms and justice. Latvia has been elected to important UN bodies, including the Human Rights Council, the Economic and Social Council and the Peacebuilding Commission. The Baltic states also had an official candidate for the post of UN Secretary-General.

The Security Council election is still ahead of us. If elected, Latvia will have a unprecedented opportunity to protect democratic values and the rules-based international order, enhance its own international reputation, and take a strict stand on issues that are pivotal to the security of the region. Together for peace and resilience!

*Gunda Reire*





|

# LATVIA'S CANDIDACIES AT THE UN

Edgars Rinkēvičs

## Latvia's Path to the UN Security Council

Thirty-three years ago, shortly after the restoration of independence in 1991, Latvia became a full-fledged member of the United Nations (UN). The UN has played a crucial role in the history of the state of Latvia, having served as an instrument of Latvia's foreign policy with respect to the irreversible consolidation of statehood, the protection of national interests and participation in global processes.

In 2025, Latvia will for the first time run for election as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, for the 2026–2027 period. The Security Council is the UN body responsible for international peace and security, consisting of five permanent member states (the United Kingdom, the USA, France, Russia, and China) and ten member states elected for a two-year term. The decisions of the UN Security Council are binding to all UN members. The election will take place in New York in June 2025. Latvia's task today is to convince two-thirds of UN member states, meaning at least 129 countries, that it is a worthy candidate.

This candidacy demonstrates Latvia's ability to take responsibility for international peace and security, the protection of international law, as well as the effectiveness and modernisation of the UN system itself.

The UN need not be overly glorified, yet it is an important institution in many respects, and the national interests of its member states have a significant impact on the development of the organisation. In the future, the UN will continue to be as effective as its member states want it to be. Latvia believes that the opinion of any state, big or small, is of consequence and deserves representation.

### What the UN Security Council means for Latvia

Latvia's candidacy in the UN Security Council elections is by no means a spur-of-the-moment decision – it is the result of persistent and deliberate efforts by Latvia's diplomats and experts. Latvia has been able to clearly demonstrate to the international community that it is a democratic Western country that upholds compliance with human rights and democratic values throughout the world. Pursuant to

a decision taken by the Cabinet of Ministers in 2011, Latvia submitted its candidacy for the 2025 UN Security Council elections for 2026–2027.

For Latvia, a seat on the UN Security Council is about more than just the state's diplomatic maturity and prestige. For Latvia, a seat on the Security Council will yield additional benefits through the protection and consolidation of an international environment favourable to Latvia's own security. As a member of the UN Security Council, Latvia will be able to safeguard a rules-based international order and democratic values at a higher level. A seat on the UN Security Council provides the opportunity to highlight issues pertaining to the security of Latvia and the Baltic region as a whole. Latvia's campaign slogan is "Together for Peace and Resilience".

Criticism of the UN Security Council's achievements, its structure, the veto rights of the Big Five, and the Council's inability to take decisions regarding international conflicts and aggression is no secret. Every year at the General Assembly of the UN, Latvia is among those calling for reform of the Security Council. While the Security Council consistently encounters difficulties wherever national interests intersect, its role in maintaining international peace and security remains preeminent. That does not, however, mean that we should abandon efforts to make the institution more democratic, efficient and appropriate to the realities of the 21st century.

---

Our main task is safeguarding the UN Charter, the rule of law, peace, and the sovereignty and territorial integrity of UN member states.

---

## **Latvia's contributions along its path to the UN Security Council**

Latvia is taking an active stand against Russia's aggression against Ukraine and is making sure that the territorial integrity of Ukraine remains high on the UN agenda alongside other topical issues such as cyber security and countering disinformation, promoting women's rights and empowerment, climate change and more. The UN Security Council deals with decisions that are binding to all members on the resolution of conflicts, implementing international sanctions and peace-keeping efforts.

Since receiving a mandate from the Cabinet of Ministers, the foreign service has laid the diplomatic groundwork to secure support in various regions by strengthening our diplomatic relations with UN member states; this involves planning and expanding Latvia's diplomatic representation by enlarging our network of embassies.

Latvian diplomats and experts have undertaken important responsibilities through active involvement in UN bodies, such as the UN Human Rights Council,

the Economic and Social Council, the Peacebuilding Commission, the Commission on the Status of Women, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the International Law Commission, and others.

Latvia ensures that there is active civic involvement, including youth involvement, in decision-making processes and presses for transparency and openness in the UN. Latvia supports the UN Youth Delegate Programme both financially and through practical measures. These efforts encourage young people to broaden their perspectives and foster an understanding of the impact that global issues have at a national level and give them an opportunity to take part and have a say in these matters. Youth opinions are crucial and are taken into account in the drafting of Latvia's official positions.

In recent years, Latvia has increased its involvement in UN peacekeeping missions by joining the United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO) in the Middle East and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

The Global Sustainability Development Goals Index ranks Latvia 14th among UN member states in terms of progress towards achieving these global targets. Latvia is also helping others fulfil the UN Agenda 2030 through its role in development cooperation, which has been ongoing for the last 20 years. In the spirit of solidarity, Latvia's development cooperation policy is becoming ever more global. A significant portion of our support goes to Ukraine, Moldova and countries in Central Asia. Latvia is also expanding cooperation through projects with countries in Africa. In its international activities, Latvia's primary areas of focus are good governance, democracy, human rights, gender equality, digitalisation and environmental sustainability.

## **Latvia's priorities in the UN Security Council**

First and foremost – democracy and the rule of law. Latvia is well-aware of the value of freedom and independence. Our history is characterised by centuries under foreign rule and our fight for independence has taught us resilience and provided us with an intimate understanding of the challenges faced by other small states.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the situation in the Middle East remain global challenges. Our main task is safeguarding the UN Charter, the rule of law, peace, and the sovereignty and territorial integrity of UN member states.

Secondly, Latvia is focused on ensuring women's rights and implementing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. Latvia is a frontrunner in this area in many respects. We are among only 14 countries worldwide that have established full legal guarantees for gender equality in employment and business. We promote women's participation in science, technology and engineering. Fifty-one percent of Latvian scientists are women.



**President of Latvia Edgars Rinkēvičs at the UN Security Council high-level open debate in New York on 20 September 2023.** Photo: Ilmārs Znotiņš, Chancery of the President of Latvia

Promoting women's participation and eradicating gender-based violence are among the long-term priorities of Latvia's development cooperation policy. We will continue to support the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN WOMEN) and promote the local and global implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda.

Finally, we will address solutions for climate change, sustainability and development. We have to act now to solve an unprecedented climate crisis, especially the unfair distribution of its impact on small island states and developing countries. The sustainability of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) is based on strengthening their resilience. Latvia contributed to this goal, including financially, and took on leadership commitments at the fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States.

Innovation and new technologies have a huge potential to mitigate climate change and its consequences. Latvia shares its experience with sustainable solutions in terms of managing natural resources, ensuring the availability of clean drinking water and combating marine pollution.

Latvia will also continue to actively participate in addressing security challenges in the digital and information space, including in the area of artificial intelligence.



**President of Latvia (1999-2007) Vaira Viķe-Freiberga speaking with Gunda Reire in the White Hall of Riga Castle, 20 February 2024. Photo: Dāvids Doršs, Chancery of the President of Latvia**

# The Glass Ceiling Has Been Shattered

An Interview with Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga

Gunda Reire spoke with President of Latvia (1999–2007) **Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga**.  
Riga Castle, White Hall, 20 February 2024

**Having been President of Latvia, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s special envoy for reforms, and also the first and only candidate from the Baltic States for the position of Secretary-General of the UN, your contributions in strengthening Latvia’s place within the United Nations are manifold. The UN is garnering criticism around the world, but as the saying goes – you play the cards that you are dealt. What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the UN?**

I think we have to talk about two basic principles here. First, the creation and founding of the UN as an international, supranational organisation after World War II already attested to the desire of the majority of influential states to set out the fundamental principles and values that the world ought to abide by in order to prevent a repeat of the horrors that a huge part of the whole world had just experienced during the war in Europe and the Pacific. That included not just the Japanese invasion of Korea and China, but also American engagement in the Philippines and elsewhere. Immense civilian and military casualties were seen everywhere.

The principles of the UN were created, reaffirmed and also built on those upheld by the League of Nations in the period between the two world wars – principles which, one can say, were dissolved with the German invasion of Poland in 1939. After World War II, the international community returned to the idea that guidelines and principles need to be set and that ideals need to be formulated and stated. That was done in the first years of development.

But the United Nations cannot implement these ideals abstractly. For the UN to be a functional agent, we have to recall the second basic principle, namely that the United Nations consists of separate nations. These independent states, each with their own opinions, are what determine the organisation’s ability or inability to act. If we speak about the UN doing this or not doing that, we must always keep in mind that it is the majority of nations that have decided to do this or not do that.



The President of Latvia addressing the 61st UN General Assembly in New York, 19 September 2006.

Photo: Chancery of the President of Latvia

Of course, a fatal flaw in the structure of the organisation is the veto rights of the five permanent members of the Security Council. This has proven to be a huge stumbling block in the UN's capacity to become a global-level agent able to take action and influence outcomes. Attempts have been made, and some partial results have been achieved. Yet these efforts have always run up against the clashing opinions of the member states and the fact that there is an immense gap between the ideals written down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Charter and other documents and what is actually happening in the world.

At times, this gap widens, while at other times it seems that perhaps it is becoming smaller, that we are somehow progressing and approaching our ideals. And then inevitably something happens again where we clearly see that some nations, especially large, rich nations with great military powers, simply decide to do as they please with blatant disregard for everything they have committed to. And we also have the so-called Global South states that have never committed to certain principles.

**The UN is often seen as an independent, autonomous entity even though it is not united and is, essentially, a union of sovereign states in all their diversity.**



Just as can be seen in any country – if it is a democratic and open country, there will be a diversity of opinions. And naturally such a diversity of opinions also exists at the global level among different nations, even regarding the fundamental principles which everyone ought to commit to.

Look at human rights, for example. Such theocratic states as Afghanistan and Iran obviously consider women to be subhuman. The principles of human rights confirmed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights ought to be applied to both genders, yet these states completely fail to do so at an official level.

**There is a certain consensus in the international community on the issue of whether the UN needs to be reformed. But this consensus dissipates as soon as solutions need to be sought. In 2005, you were named Special Envoy of the Secretary-General of the UN for reforms. Back then, Kofi Annan was attempting an overhaul of the United Nations. Twenty years have passed, but proposals for the reform of the UN Security Council have pretty much stayed the same. We might be referring to other states because the world has changed slightly, but everything else has stayed the same. You have had first-hand experience with UN processes, so allow me to ask you this: can the UN actually be reformed?**

With difficulty. Anything can be done within the UN, but with great difficulty. And for some issues, such as veto rights, there obviously is no solution at all. It is an uphill battle – there have been attempts to roll this stone of Sisyphus uphill, but it never stays up there and always rolls back down. Why is that? The answer comes back to the member states. The same member states that created it come with contradictory demands.

In some areas, progress has been achieved on several issues. I remember from my childhood that my dad had bought a Philips radio somewhere in Europe, and we had it with us when we fled to Morocco. We were deep in the countryside, and that short-wave radio was our only link to the world at large. When I had grasped some basic French, I would listen to the radio out of boredom, and I noticed that they often mentioned the United Nations in the news. It was usually the question of whether some negotiations would take place between the communist and the capitalist countries, the so-called Eastern and Western blocs. The news said that for the meeting to commence and for them to even be able to adopt the agenda, they had to agree on what type of table to sit at – a square one or a round one.

For me as an 11-year-old who assumed adults to be rational and intelligent beings ruling the world, this was astonishing. Because it was clear that this is an important organisation which determines the world order. The first thing I understood was that they were obviously incapable of establishing a fair world order, because otherwise we would not be living in exile – we would be back home. And second, if they have to argue about whether to sit at a round or square table before they even get to the agenda, then there are insurmountable divisions in the world.



President Vīķe-Freiberga at the Third World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held by the UN in Durban, South Africa on 31 August 2001.

Photo: Chancery of the President of Latvia

These divisions are many and varied: divisions between poor and rich nations, and between colonial powers and those colonised. As colonial powers crumbled over the decades, new states emerged, and there was constant change. The old colonial states – the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Belgium – slowly, over the decades, relinquished their colonies one by one. Thus, the principle of the self-determination of nations was immortalised and implemented in practice. At the same time, this principle was not applied at all to the Baltic States and all the other countries that had been invaded, annexed, and subjugated during World War II by the Soviet Union, which then imposed its totalitarian rule.

**I agree with you that a reform of the veto rights in the UN Security Council is impossible. But if we look at the achievements of the UN – the codification of international law and the many principles of international law that seem obvious today – these were achieved through decades of work by the UN. You also mentioned the process of decolonisation, and here the UN also had a major impact. The 2005 attempt at reforms also left a mark. For example, the Peacebuilding Commission was established, which is a significant step forward in terms of conflict resolution, as conflicts do not end with the signing of a peace treaty but rather with the complete reconstruction of public life and government. Of course, the main sticking point in the UN Security Council is veto rights, and on that there is no way forward. But perhaps there are some smaller steps for improving the UN Security Council?**

Yes, there could be [such steps]. The core group of permanent members could be expanded, but they should not be given veto rights. It would likely be possible to agree on expanding the group of permanent members of the Security Council to include truly large nations. If China has a seat, why doesn't India? Why isn't Brazil there, which is a huge country representing the continent of South America, which isn't represented there at all? On this, an agreement could be possible, but the stumbling block would again be veto rights – how can the permanent members work if five of them have veto rights but the rest do not?

That could be another obstacle to meaningful forward progress.

But let's leave the veto holders for a while and look at the number of other elected members. Perhaps the number of elected members can stay as it is, but be joined by permanent members that are, shall we say, in the outer circle of the core.

This could be a new, third category of members in the UN Security Council. The big countries would then not have to hold elections to have a permanent seat on the Security Council, but rather they would make up a separate group from the veto holders and those that gain a seat through rotation.

---

The overall benefit was to create an image and remind everyone about our existence.

---

**I also have something to ask you as our only candidate for the post of Secretary-General, and a woman at that. I clearly recall the arguments voiced back then for why you should become the Secretary-General. Similarly to what we just spoke about regarding reforms, these arguments still stand today – the post of Secretary-General of the United Nations has never been held by someone from Eastern Europe, and never by a woman. And we also vividly remember the outcome of that election, namely the quote that a camel was more likely to go through the eye of a needle than a woman become Secretary-General. How would you describe those events? What are your memories from that time?**

That is a weakness of the UN, and it became apparent in those elections – everything has already been decided ten years ago. Ten years prior to the elections that I ran in, when Kofi Annan was elected, a trade had been agreed, mutual promises exchanged informally, that if we now have a representative from Africa, then the next one will come from Asia. This argument was revealed to me after the final indicative vote, when China and Russia vetoed me. Sergey Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia, came to me then and said: “Madame President, I'd like you to know that our veto was nothing personal; we are fulfilling the promise we made ten years ago when we were asked to vote for Kofi Annan as the African candidate.”

**There was an interesting discussion in Latvia at the time. A veto from Russia was, of course, expected. I remember that there were a lot of heated exchanges,**



President Vīķe-Freiberga meeting with Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the UN, at the United Nations headquarters in New York, 15 May 2000. Photo: Chancery of the President of Latvia

**debates at universities, and expert analyses of whether it was a smart strategic choice to run knowing it was impossible to win.**

My initial reaction when I heard the offer was: are you insane?! I don't want to be a sacrificial lamb!

**But the returns were huge.**

It did turn out to bring immense returns, because our diplomats were ecstatic that they had a very specific assignment and that they could request the highest level meetings in their countries of posting to explain the principles that we had defined when submitting my candidacy, such as gender equality and the fact that Eastern Europe had never acted as a region in the United Nations, we had simply been wiped from the map. A win in the elections would have been a righting of this historical wrong against the whole region. The overall benefit was to create an image and remind everyone about our existence.

**Let me ask you a really simple question – but one which becomes a much more complicated question when combined with criticism of the UN in the international community as well as in Latvia. Why should Latvia be a part of the UN if it is such a dysfunctional organisation?**

You see, if it is dysfunctional, it can only improve with the help of its member states. And one state is one vote. And this one vote – our vote – may very well be the deciding one.

**My last question will be on the topic of women and leadership. Women’s rights will be a theme that Latvia will champion during its campaign for the UN Security Council and of course in the event of being elected. Statistics on women’s participation within the bodies of the UN show that very few of the highest positions are held by women. The highest levels of international politics are still considered to be a men’s club, so to speak. How did you feel back then, being the President of Latvia, a candidate for Secretary-General, and the special envoy for UN reforms? And how do you feel about it now? Has anything changed?**

Around the time when I was elected as President of Latvia and I went to my first UN General Assembly, the Council of Women Leaders had already been founded<sup>1</sup>. At first it was very small. I remember that at the Davos Forum, through great difficulty, we managed to secure the organisation a small side-event session, and we were given a tiny little room. We were four female presidents sitting in front of the audience answering questions and talking about the organisation and our work. That tiny room was so crowded! People literally couldn’t breathe, they were standing one on top of another, pressed against the walls, the doors were open and there were men standing out in the hallway wanting to listen in on what the women were saying and what our arguments were.

---

People literally couldn’t breathe, they were standing one on top of another, pressed against the walls, the doors were open and there were men standing out in the hallway wanting to listen in on what the women were saying and what our arguments were.

---

And then, as the years went by, during my tenure as President of Latvia, I saw how the rooms provided to the Council of Women Leaders discussions at Davos grew physically larger.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Council of Women World Leaders was founded in 1996 as an organisation to unite women leaders – heads of state and government from around the world.

**That is a beautiful comparison.**

This is a concrete way for more and more new members, women presidents, to join the organisation and the world stage. Of course, some of these women leaders are sometimes in office for a short time; often it is difficult for them to hold on. Yet they have been there. But there are other examples, too, such as Michelle Bachelet<sup>2</sup>, who first managed to overcome many obstacles to become President of Chile, then went to work at the UN, and afterwards her country wanted her back and she won a second term in office. The glass ceiling has been shattered.

---

<sup>2</sup> Michelle Bachelet has been President of Chile (2006–2010; 2014–2018), Executive Director of UN WOMEN (2010-2013), and High Commissioner for Human Rights (2019–2022).

Ilvija Pūce

## **Elected Experts: A Glimpse into the Work of the UN Treaty Bodies**

Many are familiar with the Indian folk-tale about six blind men who wanted to know what an elephant looked like. When they finally encountered an elephant in the Raja's palace gardens, each man touched the giant animal and each of them came to their own conclusion about what it might look like.

The first man touched the elephant's side and said that it was as smooth and sturdy as a formidable wall. Another man, upon feeling the trunk, likened it to a colossal serpent. The third man, having touched the tusks, recoiled in fear, describing the elephant as sharp and pointed like a spear. The fourth man, upon touching one of the huge animal's legs, decided that an elephant resembled a rough tree trunk. Having touched the ears, the fifth man said that the elephant reminded him of a fan. Lastly, the sixth man, feeling the elephant's tail, frowned and insisted that the elephant was nothing more than an old rope.

This ancient Indian fable illustrates the subject of this essay as it pertains to the functioning of the United Nations. The author has touched the UN "elephant", having served on the UN Committee against Torture (CAT) for four years in the period between 2020 and 2023, and will provide her personal insights into the work of the UN human rights treaty bodies, the challenges they face, and the broader benefits they offer to the global community.

### **What are the UN Treaty Bodies?**

The UN stands as a complex entity, with human rights being undeniably one of its core focuses. The rather swift adoption of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 marked a significant milestone in this regard. This landmark achievement, with 48 countries voting in favour, 8 abstaining, and none opposing, was facilitated by the grim aftermath of World War II, when humanity could only lower its eyes with shame, having seen the depths of malice and cruelty it was capable of.

Despite the already growing tension between the Eastern and Western blocs, it was still the right time and an opportunity to reach a common agreement and define the global catalogue of human rights.

The declaration, as suggested by its title, however, was rather an expression of intent, not a legally binding document. By adoption the declaration, the signatory states showed their willingness to support human rights, but did not commit to any legal obligations. To establish accountability and ensure compliance with human rights, various detailed human rights treaties were subsequently drafted. However, as can be seen from the considerable time gap between the adoption of the Universal Declaration and these treaties, it was a much more complicated and time-consuming process, highlighting the complexities and challenges involved in transforming the mere declaration into enforceable commitments.

Until today, the UN has adopted more than 70 treaties and declarations on human rights. Of these, ten treaties envision mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating how states that have ratified these documents are implementing the protections for the relevant rights. These mechanisms are: the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (a monitoring mechanism for the 1965<sup>1</sup> International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination), the Human Rights

---

Ten treaties envision mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating how states that have ratified these documents are implementing the protections for the relevant rights.

---

Committee (a monitoring mechanism for the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights), the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (a monitoring mechanisms for the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (a monitoring mechanism for the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women), the Committee against Torture (a monitoring mechanism for the 1984 Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment), the Committee on the Rights of the Child (a monitoring mechanism for the 1989 Conven-

tion on the Rights of the Child), the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (a monitoring mechanisms for the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families), the Committee on Enforced Disappearances (a monitoring mechanism for the 2006 International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance), the Committee on the Rights of

---

<sup>1</sup> The year of the adoption of the convention.



Persons with Disabilities (a monitoring mechanism for the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), and the Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (a monitoring mechanism for the 2002 Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment).

Depending on the conditions set out in the relevant human rights treaty, each committee is composed of 10 to 25 independent experts,<sup>2</sup> elected by the state parties for a term of four years. The committees are tasked with examining reports submitted by the state parties and assessing their situation with regard to the human rights enshrined in the particular treaty. Furthermore, eight of these committees may, under certain conditions, receive and consider individual complaints or communications from individuals.

In addition to their core duties, the committees draft general comments interpreting the provisions of the relevant treaties and organise and support thematic discussions and other events related to the treaties. The Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture is the only committee that does not examine national reports but instead organizes on-site visits to assess the situations directly.



**The author of this essay at Palais Wilson, the venue where the UN Committee against Torture convenes in Geneva, in November 2021.**

Photo from the author's personal archives

<sup>2</sup> Several UN human rights treaties provide that when a certain number of signatories is reached, the number of members of the committee is increased, while other treaties do not contain such a clause. For example, the number of members of the Committee against Torture has remained unchanged (10 members) since its establishment, even though 174 states have ratified the treaty or acceded to it.

## The Work of the Treaty Bodies

In accordance with the obligations set forth in the treaties, member states are required to regularly submit reports to each committee detailing their progress in strengthening the human rights outlined in the respective treaty. Generally, the reporting cycle spans five years. In their national reports, countries are expected to elaborate on the legal, administrative, or practical measures they have implemented during this period to uphold their obligations under the treaty.

Even though it is not a mandatory requirement, all committees examine these national reports through a constructive dialogue that involves direct participation of representatives of the respective governments. This process allows the committees to provide verbal feedback on the report's contents and pose additional questions to the government representatives, granting them time to prepare appropriate responses. Based on the report and this dialogue, the committees can identify areas of progress and aspects that require improvement.

Following the examination of the report and exchange of opinions, the committees draft and release their concluding observations, commending positive developments, pinpointing areas of concern regarding the implementation and protection of the relevant human rights, and providing recommendations for action that the state should undertake during the next reporting period. All national reports and committee conclusions are made publicly available.

Most committees also examine individual complaints submitted by individuals who believe their rights have been violated. For such complaints to be considered, the relevant treaty or its additional protocols must provide for individual complaints procedure, the signatory state must accept it as binding, and the complainant or a group of complainants must have exhausted all available national legal remedies. Additionally, a complaint regarding the same issue must not have been submitted to another international complaint mechanism. While the decisions of the treaty bodies do not have the same legal force as court judgements, most states strive to implement them unless there are exceptional reasons not to do so. These decisions form the so-called jurisprudence of the treaty bodies. Alongside the general comments issued by the committees, - which, though also not legally binding, offer authoritative interpretations of the particular human rights enshrined in the treaties, - this jurisprudence serves as a significant reference for national case-law and legislation on human rights.



The UN Committee against Torture at Palais Wilson in Geneva, its meeting venue, May 2022.

Photo from the author's personal archives

## Why are Treaty Bodies Essential?

In a perfect world, states would faithfully uphold their commitments under ratified human rights treaties, rendering monitoring mechanisms unnecessary. However, we do not live, nor are likely to live within our lifetimes, in such an ideal world. Thus, a common point of reference is essential for assessing the actual human rights situation in each state party to the treaties.

The 46 member states of the Council of Europe are in a certain way privileged, as for them this benchmark is the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which is enforced by the legally binding decisions of the European Court of Human Rights. Additionally, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and several other mechanisms actively and efficiently assess human rights situation in Council of Europe member states through direct observations.

Also in other regions various mechanisms exist for monitoring the implementation of human rights, such as the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, etc. Yet the world map is much bigger, and the only common universal point of reference regarding human rights compliance remains the UN treaties. The treaty bodies, in turn, serve as practical "thermometers" to provide as objective a reading as possible of each signatory state's adherence to their human rights obligations set in the treaties.

The work of the UN treaty bodies holds particular importance since the commitments outlined in the treaties are also undertaken by states where, in everyday practice, little attention is given to the implementation and promotion of human rights. This presents an interesting paradox: while most countries prefer to “join the club” by ratifying the human rights treaties, this does not necessarily mean they will actively review and assess their adherence to these human rights commitments at the national level. Yet, with very few exceptions,<sup>3</sup> states earnestly fulfil their reporting obligations and engage into direct discussions with the committees regarding the challenges and achievements during the reporting cycle. Still, it must be noted that these dialogues can sometimes become quite intense, especially when a state firmly believes that its practices are exemplary, yet global human rights standards have evolved beyond what the state perceives as acceptable. The committees through dialogues and concluding observations highlight critical human rights issues, even if the countries themselves do not prioritize them.

The committees also play a crucial role in developing human rights standards. Drawing from their extensive experience and global perspectives on specific human rights, the treaty bodies provide general comments elaborating in detail on the substance of particular rights or obligations set by the relevant treaties. Although drafting general comments is not their primary responsibility, most committees actively engage in this process both to explain the essence of particular clauses of the respective treaties and to provide general guidelines regarding, for example, what information states should include in their reports.

The drafting of general comments comprises three stages: discussion, elaboration and adoption. During this process, the committees engage with various stakeholders in the relevant area of law, including non-governmental organisations and experts. General comments vary in length and complexity and may be revised or replaced over the time as the committees gain more experience and human rights standards evolve. The number of general comments issued by each committee differs significantly, with the Human Rights Committee having released around 40 general comments, while the Committee against Torture has issued only four.

While general comments are not legally binding, unlike the human rights treaties they elucidate, they are regarded as authoritative guidelines on interpreting UN human rights treaties. As such, they foster understanding of the scope and evolution of human rights at a global level.

---

<sup>3</sup> For example, in 2021-2022, Nicaragua refused to cooperate with six UN treaty bodies. The Committee against Torture and the Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture responded with a joint public statement condemning this action on the part of Nicaragua. See: The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Nicaragua: Two UN rights committees deplore refusal to cooperate and lack of information”, accessed on 20 August 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2022/11/nicaragua-two-un-rights-committees-deplore-refusal-cooperate-and-lack>.

## Challenges

The UN treaty bodies certainly hold considerable authority and respect, yet their influence depends on different interconnected elements. Unlike the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), whose judgements are unequivocally binding on member states, the UN committees function as expert groups with a quasi-judicial role.

The committees draw conclusions, provide practical recommendations, and follow-up on their implementation. However, they lack direct means to compel the state parties to co-operate. If a state party fails to improve their human rights situation and returns to Geneva at the end of the next reporting period with the same alleged human rights violations, the committees can only express their regrets. This raises an important question: what underpins the international authority of the treaty bodies? And what challenges do they face in ensuring their opinions are respected and properly considered?

It is a well-known fact that personality significantly influences any office, whether it be a judge, a politician, or a teacher. The treaty bodies are not exception to this rule. The elected experts on these committees shape the way the committees work, and their actions and decisions largely determine whether the committee only fulfils its core tasks or also undertakes additional duties to further enhance the understanding of relevant human rights. The competence of the experts directly correlates with the quality of the committee's recommendations, and, given the limited number of experts on each committee, it is crucial that each member is highly qualified and articulate.

---

Membership in the treaty bodies, especially those considered most significant, is to a certain extent a matter of prestige of the state.

---

What qualifications are necessary and what are the requirements to become a committee member, and how are they elected? According to all UN treaties, the core requirement for experts, albeit with different phrasing, is to maintain independence and impartiality in their duties. At the same time, experts are nominated by their respective governments, and the nominations are voted on by representatives of the governments of state parties of the relevant treaty. Membership in the treaty bodies, especially those considered most significant, is to a certain extent a matter of prestige of the state, and the election outcomes are influenced also by the political capacity and activity of the country during the election process. In practice, this means that states invest resources in informing and actively persuading other states to vote for their candidate through various diplomatic efforts. This process is undoubtedly easier for larger states, but even they can occasionally encounter unforeseen challenges.

The human rights treaties do not stipulate detailed requirements for committee members, thus giving countries flexibility in selecting their candidates for expert roles. Often, individuals with prior civil service experience are nominated. This, in turn, raises the question: are members of the committees truly independent and can they be impartial? There is no definitive answer. Still, to succeed in the elections of treaty body experts, state parties pay a great deal of attention to selecting candidates with substantial, verifiable professional experience and profound knowledge in the relevant area.

An important yet seldom-discussed aspect regarding the UN treaty bodies is the workload of the experts. A seat on a committee is not merely an honorary title, it demands extensive time resource. For example, members of the UN Committee against Torture spend at least 11 weeks per year at in-person meetings in Geneva,

---

With an increasing number of state parties to human rights treaties, the volume of reports is increasing too, pushing the committees' working capacity to its limits.

---

and these meetings require extensive preparations, with the experts having to read thousands of pages of information, draft decisions regarding individual complaints, prepare general comments, take part in thematic events, etc. (at the same time, work in the committees is mostly not remunerated; experts are paid a daily allowance for in-person meeting days to cover their stay in Geneva or New York). Due to this, active practitioners are seldom on the committees as it is almost impossible to combine their principal work duties with those of the committee, although there are, of course, some countries that, under-

standing the specific nature of the work of committees, consider the participation of their experts as part of their work duties.

Many committee experts are either scholars who can flexibly manage their workload and access academic resources for the preparation, or individuals such as former experts in the relevant area, bureaucrats, diplomats who have completed their active careers, allowing them to dedicate their time to the committee without compromising their principal duties. Consequently, one of the main challenges for the committees is to secure and maintain insights and experience regarding current practical aspects in the relevant area. As previously mentioned, the committees' outputs are intended to be programmatic recommendations that states should implement within a specific timeframe. Therefore, these recommendations need to be clear, actionable and specific, based on both theoretical knowledge and practical insights.

Another significant challenge related to the workload of the experts is the committee's capacity to examine the states' reports in a timely manner. With an increasing number of state parties to human rights treaties, the volume of reports is

increasing too, pushing the committees' working capacity to its limits and resulting in a serious backlog of reports. For instance, in 2024, the Committee against Torture was examining reports for periods ending in 2019 and 2020. Such delay undermines states' confidence in the efficiency of the report review process and significantly hampers the committees' ability to prepare thoroughly. To accurately evaluate a national report and the situation on the ground, a committee must additionally obtain comprehensive information about the period since the report's submission, particularly given that drastic changes occur in a short time nowadays.

Obtaining high-quality information is yet another major challenge faced by the treaty bodies. As previously mentioned, the basis for assessing the human rights situation in a state is its national report; however, for a truly objective perspective, information must also come from diverse sources. The greater number and variety of sources, the more comprehensive is the information obtained.

In some states, a strong civil society and active academic environment contribute additional insights by providing supplementary information and drafting a so-called shadow reports. It also happens that the national human rights protection institutions actively use the opportunity to highlight and seek solutions to pressing issues. In states with a presence of UN agencies and other international organisations, these entities can shed light on matters of concern to the relevant committee. However, there are still states where obtaining information remains extremely difficult.

The secretariats of the committees play an invaluable role in the gathering of information. Nevertheless, the experts responsible for examining the relevant national reports must also possess investigative skills to gain a comprehensive picture of the actual compliance with relevant rights in the country. This understanding should cover the genuine reasons behind any shortcomings and identify opportunities for improvement. This work is complex yet vital to ensure that the conclusions and recommendations are of the highest quality. It is evident that states highly appreciate when the dialogue reveals that the committee has genuinely delved into the situation and acquired a broad understanding possibly beyond what is presented in the report. Criticisms of negative trends are also taken much more seriously when the committee can substantiate them with specific information and facts during discussions.

The cooperation by states is pivotal for the effective functioning of the committees. It is often observed that the reports submitted by states are not only delayed but also lack completeness, omitting aspects of great significance for an objective assessment of the situation. To address this, several committees have introduced a system where states receive a list of key issues beforehand to guide the preparation of their reports. However, drafting these lists is yet another demanding task for the committees.

The secretariat of the UN treaty bodies employ full-time staff who offer substantial and invaluable support to the experts. They handle all administrative tasks, including organizing committee meetings, facilitating the attendance of national

delegations, representatives from non-governmental organizations, and committee members themselves. They also oversee the distribution of all information concerning national reports, individual complaints, and other relevant aspects to the committee members. The secretariats also play an important role in the substantive work of the committees, helping to prepare drafts of concluding observations, decisions on individual communications, and lists of issues sent to states before they draft their reports.

Despite its significant role, the secretariat is provided with very limited resources, while workloads are continually increasing. This resource constraint represents another challenge for the committees, as the seamless circulation of information,

---

For many nations, the reporting procedure represents the only opportunity for international monitoring and evaluation of their human rights situation.

---

logistics, and support on substantive matters is essential for ensuring the effective and comprehensive functioning of the treaty bodies.

Another crucial issue is the lack of cooperation between committees. Often, some of issues examined by one committee overlap with the competence of another. While one might think that giving additional attention to a major problem would be beneficial, it actually leads to inefficient use of resources. The situation becomes complicated even further if the committees have differing opinions on the same issue.

While the list of challenges faced by the UN treaty bodies could be extended endlessly, this section's objective was to highlight a few key issues. The examples mentioned here serve to underscore the immense responsibility and significant workload that comes with being an elected expert on a UN treaty body, a role often mistakenly perceived as merely honorary. When an expert is elected to a committee, they bear a substantial and personal responsibility for maintaining the highest standard of the committee's work. The quality of concluding observations, decisions on individual complaints, and general comments are foundational to the authority of the treaty bodies, despite the fact that these documents are formally not legally binding. Furthermore, for many nations, the reporting procedure represents the only opportunity for international monitoring and evaluation of their human rights situation. Hence, the reporting process and dialogue offer a unique global platform to address critical human rights issues over the world.



## Role and Prospects

The UN treaty bodies hold remarkable potential to influence policies not only internationally but also nationally. The reporting cycle and the subsequent regular recommendations for enhancing the fulfilment of obligations outlined in the UN human rights treaties foster the observance and protection of human rights globally. Through their vast global experience and highly skilled experts, the committees are able to make impartial assessments of how states are meeting their human rights obligations and offer clear guidelines for better adherence to human rights standards via rights-based policies. As previously noted, concluding observations, the system of individual complaints, and general comments - which provide more detailed and precise interpretations of the rights enshrined in the treaties - have established valuable international case law. This case law specifically impacts the legal and judicial practices of individual states, including Latvia.

It must, however, also be noted that since establishing the first committee in 1969, the treaty body system has been considerably expanded. It has, without a doubt, improved the protection of human rights, and this trend will most likely also continue in future. The understanding of human rights is a work in progress; it includes an increasing number of aspects and covers an ever-broader range of topics. The question is: can the system of treaty bodies continue to expand indefinitely while working with the same old methods? Is it enough to increase funding, improve communication between committees, and optimise individual procedures, or there are more comprehensive reforms needed? If we accept that the committees are already working at their limits in terms of workload and capacity, and that the situation has been difficult for many years, it seems that only comprehensive reforms could bring about significant improvements.

Looking at committee working methods critically, it must be said that they are failing to evolve with the times or are doing so insufficiently. New approaches and ways to change the existing order need to be sought – such efforts have already been ongoing for several decades, but reaching agreement on these issues is extremely difficult. Sometimes it seems that there is not enough political will to take this step. Despite wars still raging and humanity still having no reason to feel too proud of itself, today many states have lost interest in having an international mechanism assess their human rights standing in an efficient and regular way even though they have not officially reneged on these commitments. Complicated discussions are ongoing in the committees themselves, as well as in the broader UN system, regarding possibilities to strengthen and perhaps reform the work of the treaty bodies. Unfortunately, it seems that these discussions fail to properly involve non-governmental organisations, national human rights organisations and other stakeholders in the protection of human rights.

However, it is crucial that we do not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Committees must not lose their current fragile independence and trustworthiness as impartial mechanisms. Curiously, the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated the importance of maintaining in-person dialogue with government representatives, non-governmental organisations and other institutions. Attempts to hold remote meetings, even disregarding various technical issues, became 'talking head' sessions without any meaningful interaction. Change of tone during in-person meetings must also be highlighted as another positive. If in previous years committees would often play prosecutors, with national delegations taking the defence, then nowadays most dialogues are held with a much more relaxed and constructive attitude, thus promoting mutual understanding and allowing for the parties to better recognise each other's views and arguments.

Even though some have compared the current treaty body system with the Titanic – sinking as the band merrily plays on – the author would rather draw a parallel with an old-fashioned locomotive: huffing and puffing for scarcity of coal, it still soldiers on, rolling down its familiar, worn-down tracks through terrain impassable to any other vehicle. This system is far from perfect, yet it has done its job for many years and has facilitated far-reaching change and improvement in the protection of human rights around the world. It must be noted that, quite simply, no other such global mechanism exists. For countless people throughout the world whose human rights have been violated, this system is their last chance of seeking justice. As we improve and optimise its work, we must remember that the system is aimed at both strengthening the global human rights movement and also working for every individual whose human rights may be infringed upon.

In conclusion, I would like to express my gratitude to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, its visionary leadership, and the dedicated ambassadors who recognized the importance of having national experts on these committees. Their commitment of significant political and human resources ensured that Latvian experts could successfully stand for election to the UN treaty bodies. To date, Latvian experts who have been elected or continue to serve on UN treaty bodies include Ilze Brands-Kehre (Human Rights Committee), Elina Šteinerte (Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture), and the author of this essay (Committee against Torture).

We have gained unique experience which can be shared at a national level, and the state also benefits from being a visible player on the international stage of human rights. I earnestly hope the list of Latvian experts will continue to grow.

||

# LATVIA WITHIN THE UNITED NATIONS

# The Dynamics of Being an Ambassador at the UN in New York

Interview with Jānis Mažeiks

Ambassador **Jānis Mažeiks**, an experienced diplomat, Head of the European Union Delegation to the Republic of Moldova, former Permanent Representative of Latvia to the UN in Geneva (2007–2011) and New York (2013–2018), spoke with Agnese Vilde, Director of the Department of International Organisations and Human Rights of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia.

**We have worked together closely during both of your tenures at the United Nations, especially during your time in New York as we joined forces to protect Latvia's interests at the UN. What does it mean to be an ambassador to the United Nations? What are the main functions, duties, what is the day-to-day like?**

Serving as Ambassador to the UN in New York is a high point in any diplomatic career. Of course, an ambassador has a role to play anywhere, but the United Nations in New York is a focal point of the world. Multilateral diplomacy is sometimes difficult to explain, because unlike bilateral diplomacy, it doesn't have an immediate tangible result, such as signing an agreement or securing an investment. But all the countries of the world are interested in being represented at the UN in New York because that is the seat of the UN Security Council.

The Security Council is like an insurance policy – every country needs an insurance policy in a crisis situation, and such an insurance policy, as it were, can be procured at the UN headquarters in New York. I believe that the core interest for Member States in New York is to strengthen their security interests. The second circle of interests is related to the fact that New York is home to the UN General Assembly, and that means all the issues are common to all UN members – from disarmament in the First Committee of the General Assembly to legal matters in the Sixth Committee.

The duty of an ambassador in New York is to keep tabs on all of these issues and evaluate how they align with your national interests while shaping your country's profile within this global organisation. It is not enough to just be there. It is crucial for a country to be involved in UN processes so that you have trusted allies when issues falling within the country's range of interests come up. The United Nations is

the place to create an image for your country. What shape and form this image takes is, of course, in the hands of the ministry of foreign affairs of the relevant country, as well as the state as a whole, its ambassador and the staff of its national mission. Latvia has its own image and interests, which the ambassador works to promote.

And then, of course, there is the day-to-day: everything to do with managing the mission, as well as attending receptions, which is also a necessary part of the work to maintain a network of contacts. In addition, as Ambassador, I personally especially enjoyed interacting with the wonderful Latvian diaspora in New York and the surrounding area.

**In international politics, the time period while you were Ambassador to the UN in New York, from 2013 to 2018, was characterised by significant geopolitical challenges: threats to the international order by Russia with its annexation of Crimea in 2014, or the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH-17. A great deal of international attention was at that time focused on the escalation of the conflict in Syria and its impact on civilians. This was also the time when the UN Sustainable Development Goals were being formulated, and there was a change of the Secretary-General. How did Latvia participate in these processes and how can Latvia affect the UN agenda?**

First of all, we always have to look at national interests. Not everything that was topical to other states from other regions was always as topical for us, and vice versa – we also had issues that were a lot more important for us than they were for other regions. The conflict in Syria was an international geopolitical challenge where Latvia did not play a very active role. We do not have the resources in that region to have a meaningful impact. Therefore, we mostly acted through the European Union in that case.

In turn, the annexation of Crimea was a different reference point – Latvia was among the countries that actively pushed for this matter to be included in the agenda of the UN Security Council. The Crimea crisis demonstrated how important it is to always be ready to jump into comprehensive action. I have heard of a proverb: “Always carry a sword you will need only once in your life”. In 2014, it seemed to many colleagues of mine, myself included, that Ukraine had not properly prepared that sword. When Ukraine direly needed this issue to be included on the Security Council agenda, Ukraine had to seek the support and advice of other Member States on how to lobby its interests at the UN Security Council.

---

The Security Council is like an insurance policy – every country needs an insurance policy in a crisis situation, and such an insurance policy, as it were, can be procured at the UN headquarters in New York.

---

I have not been following the daily work of the Security Council too closely lately, but I am sure that Ukraine's responses in 2014 and today are completely different. Today, Ukraine is making full use of all diplomatic tools. This goes to show how important the UN Security Council and the UN as a whole can be for countries, and it also shows how a country can enhance its skills and abilities.

Alongside Ukraine, of course, we were also concerned with all the major issues at the UN. For example, the elections of the Secretary-General were a matter of principle for us. Unfortunately, the sad joke proved true: when looking for a woman from Eastern Europe to do a job, a man from Western Europe will be hired.

Of course, Secretary-General António Guterres has done an excellent job. Unfortunately, the 2016 Secretary-General election was a bitter moment for the Eastern European group, because in 70 years, this post in the UN system has never been attainable for a representative from our regional group despite there having been several promising candidates. Of course, we tried our best to get one of these candidates elected by supporting Kristalina Georgieva, who performed very well and is still active in the international arena, but unfortunately not in this position.

The second major block of issues was the drafting of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where Latvia participated in the shaping of the common EU position while also leaving its own mark on the matter. By that, I mean that we pushed for inclusion onto the UN agenda several issues that have been a priority for us, especially gender equality; we advocated for this to be a separate goal, and we also took a stand on the rule of law, which was included in Goal 16. It was important to ensure that the SDGs also take into consideration the development opportunities presented by information technologies; this is another area in which Latvia has been active within the United Nations.

In addition to the aforementioned work, there was, of course, also the opportunity to put forward issues that were specifically important to Latvia while holding the Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2015, as well as Latvia's nomination of several important candidates, especially Ilze Brands-Kehris, for election to the prestigious UN Human Rights Committee.

I would like to highlight once again the topic of an information society. In 2015, I co-facilitated the review of the World Summit on the Information Society together with the Ambassador of the United Arab Emirates Lana Nusseibeh; this process outlined the work to be done over the next 10 years. For me, that was one of the most interesting periods during my tenure as Ambassador to the UN. It was an intensive process consisting of lengthy inter-governmental negotiations, as well as consultations with representatives of various sectors, including tech companies.

**I would like to highlight that during your tenure in New York, Latvia held its first Presidency of the Council of the EU, which also meant taking on presidential duties in the United Nations format. As is always the case with firsts, when**



Jānis Mažeiks and Dace Mažeika taking part in the XIV Latvian Song and Dance Festival as part of the New York Latvian Folk Dance Group “Jumis”, Baltimore, USA, 29 June–3 July 2017.

Photo from personal archives

**preparing to take on additional responsibilities and dealing with an increasing amount of information, there were many unknowns going into this. Can you outline how the Presidency affected the work of the mission and the Ambassador? Did it provide additional visibility and opportunities for Latvia in the UN? I recall from my own experience that the preparatory phase started even before defining the thematic priorities for the Presidency.**

Latvia’s EU Presidency was what is called a “supporting presidency”, meaning that the EU’s efforts in New York were mostly coordinated by the EU External Action Service and its sec in New York, while the Presidency played a supporting role, because there are formats and events where the EU does not have an individual role as such and the EU Delegation cannot take part in negotiations or express the common position of the EU. But the EU still has its own interests within these formats. In such cases, the EU Delegation will turn to the EU Presidency. The EU Presidency is not only about support – it is also a duty and an opportunity.

Latvia’s foreign service had done diligent work in preparing for the Presidency. For several years already we had been analysing how each previous Presidency had performed to see what Latvia could do. A work schedule was planned out, taking into consideration what major UN events would be held during our Presidency and aligning our priorities accordingly. It was obvious that we would need to go beyond minimum participation; therefore, additional staff were assigned to the mission for the

duration of the Presidency. As the Ambassador, I was pleased to see my colleagues “spreading their wings” and going into detail on issues, displaying their diplomatic skills and expertise much more than was previously possible without the additional staff. I witnessed this in the work of Dace Rikmane, Anda Poro, Viktorija Karamane, Oskars Fridmanis, and, of course, yourself. Supported by a larger team, colleagues, who at other times physically couldn’t manage to be at several meetings or votes

---

You need to be confident that there are good candidates and that there is expertise in the specific area in the country.

---

at once or find out necessary information, participated actively during the Presidency – they led negotiations on behalf of the EU, coordinated work on various resolutions, and drafted speeches. During the Presidency, it became evident that Latvia’s limited participation in UN processes is not for lack of willingness or skill, but rather simply due to a lack of human resources. Without a sufficient number of diplomats, Latvia cannot have a more active profile.

**This experience and the lessons learned will be useful for Latvia during its next Presidency in a couple of years. You mentioned the election of Latvia’s experts to UN bodies, especially the successful election of Ilze Brands-Kehris to the UN Human Rights Committee. This goes to show that Latvia’s membership to the UN is not just comprised of the routine work of diplomats but also involves the active involvement in UN processes of various institutions and experts from Latvia. How can the Ambassador promote Latvia’s representation within these processes and help Latvian candidates advance to elected positions within the United Nations? Is there an added value to this?**

First of all, you need to be confident that there are good candidates and that there is expertise in the specific area in the country. As regards the elections for the Human Rights Committee, what helped a lot was the fact that Ilze Brands-Kehris was a very strong candidate who also had extensive experience in Latvia. During lobbying, Latvia’s transition experience was very interesting to others, as it could be a topical issue for other countries, too. Therefore, in presenting a candidate, first and foremost, it is crucial to have a good candidate and for it to be an area where Latvia has an exceptional level of expertise.

Secondly, resources, in particular adequate human resources, need to be invested in order to secure a successful result. The Ambassador’s involvement is important. I can’t even recall how many bilateral meetings I had with other ambassadors while I was lobbying for Ms Brands-Kehris’s candidacy – probably around 100. The Ambassador’s involvement in the campaign is crucial, because this signals to other countries that this candidacy is important for the state. Some countries simply rely on the fact that they are big enough and important enough, and that their candidate



is a good one, and they don't pay that much attention to lobbying, leaving it to go its own way. This has resulted in some unfortunate surprises for big, influential countries when their candidate is not elected. Thus, I repeat: the Ambassador's involvement is crucial for obtaining the desired outcome. Also, regarding the protocol aspect, if the mission is organising a reception in support of the Latvian candidate, then it is important for the Ambassador to be the host of the event. This encourages other ambassadors to attend.

In addition to having the relevant professional qualities, it is very important to maintain good personal relationships with the ambassadors of other countries. Some ambassadors receive very strict instructions on how they are to vote in UN elections. Some ambassadors can influence their instructions with their opinion. Especially if they have met with our candidate and the candidate has seemed convincing, they will send positive feedback to their capital. There are even situations where the decision on who to vote for may be at the discretion of the ambassador themselves. In that case, of course, good mutual relations between ambassadors can go a long way, transforming this rapport into votes in favour of our candidate.

**The lessons learned from the election campaign you mentioned have proven useful later on. Overall, Latvia's lobbying for its candidates in the UN has yielded results. These cases require the active involvement of our foreign service and especially close cooperation between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Riga and the mission in New York. So, this brings me to my next question. Latvia is currently working on an ambitious goal – to become a member of the UN Security Council for the first time ever. The elections will take place in New York in June 2025. Why is it important for Latvia to sit at the horseshoe-shaped table of the Security Council?**

We can come back to the insurance policy that we talked about earlier. When Russia annexed Crimea, Ukraine was very lucky to have Lithuania on the UN Security Council at that time. Specifically due to its national interests, Lithuania saw this as a crucial issue, and as a result Lithuania was one of the driving forces keeping the Ukraine issue on the agenda of the UN Security Council. First of all, Lithuania helped the issue actually get onto the agenda. Then, during the Security Council discussions, Lithuania's voice was loud and clear – it was the one setting the strong tone on the matter at every meeting of the Security Council. Of course, it was supported by the United States and other like-minded states. As for the others sitting at that table, the farther away they were geographically, the milder their position on Ukraine. Had Lithuania not been on the Security Council at that point in time, I fear that Ukraine would have had far less support within the international community in its response to Russia's actions.

So, we care about the composition of the UN Security Council; we need like-minded countries there, ones that Latvia can depend on as allies in advocating

for issues that are important for us. We also need to take responsibility ourselves – not only because it is in our own interests and those of our region, but also because we have something to bring to the table. In terms of size, Latvia is about average within the UN, based on population and territory, thus we can relate to the interests of many small countries. The majority of UN Member States are not superpowers – the majority are actually smaller than Latvia. Therefore, it is important for us to advocate for our own interests while also empathising with the interests of states in other regions. Participation in UN peace-keeping and humanitarian aid missions is a means of demonstrating in practice that we as a country care for the plight of others. Unfortunately, Latvia's financial capacity in these areas has, so far, been limited. During my tenure, Latvia joined its first UN peace-keeping mission: UN MINUSMA in Mali.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, this is our contribution to international peace and security, and on the other hand, it is an opportunity for our armed forces to gain new experience and contacts. Sadly, this experience in Mali showed that UN involvement does not always guarantee a positive outcome – but it is still important for Latvia to keep participating in UN peace-keeping operations.

With a seat on the UN Security Council, we can support and drive forward issues that have been crucial for us within the United Nations for years: not only Ukraine, but also, for example, the responsibility to protect, because everything that reinforces international law is in the interest of small states. Even though Latvia enjoys the opportunities and resources arising from its membership to NATO and the EU, as a Member State of the EU and as a democratic state, we want to see the rule of law at the heart of all international law. We want a stop to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, in part because it is undermining all the principles that international relations have been built upon for decades.

**To be elected to the UN Security Council requires sustained efforts in convincing other states to vote for Latvia in June 2025. This process of convincing was set in motion immediately after announcing our candidacy in 2011. The duty of the Ambassador to the UN is, in large part, to forge diplomatic relations with other countries. New York is the place where, within the United Nations, the Latvian Ambassador is authorised to shape Latvia's diplomatic relations with other states. Would you care to elaborate on this function and your experience?**

The Security Council campaign requires long-term planning. Latvia announced its candidacy in 2011. During my tenure, we had internal planning discussions about which UN bodies it would be most important to take part in so that we could increase our visibility as much as possible in the period right before we need to secure support from other countries for Latvia's candidacy. We have done quite well in this

---

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).

regard through our involvement in the UN Economic and Social Affairs Council (ECOSOC) and other formats. This autumn, Latvia will chair the Fourth Committee of the UN General Assembly on special political issues on the UN agenda.

**In addition, I would like to emphasise Latvia's participation in various formats for the empowerment of women.**

Of course, promoting gender equality is part of Latvia's work at the UN in New York, initially started by Inese Freimane-Deksne and then successfully continued by yourself, and I have also taken part in this. Another area that we have systematically worked on is establishing diplomatic relations with other countries. Initially, diplomatic relations are established with countries that have very similar interests. We have long-established diplomatic relations with the states with which we have political and economic contacts.

During my time in New York, Latvia established diplomatic relations with several new countries almost every year. This was not always easy, especially in the case of very small states that are far away from Latvia and which, often enough, don't have diplomatic relations with many countries; the governments of such states were not always clear on why they need diplomatic relations with Latvia. Some countries have diplomatic relations with only about 60 or so other countries. It has, on occasion, been extremely difficult to convince them that Latvia ought to be number 61, but we have succeeded nonetheless.

During my tenure, we established diplomatic relations with some very faraway states: Liberia, Lesotho, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Togo in 2014, and Cameroon, Kiribati, Micronesia, Sudan, Vanuatu, and Zimbabwe in 2015. Obviously, some of these are small island states for whom their mission in New York may very well be their only one, or one of just a handful that they have abroad. That is another reason it is worthwhile to establish diplomatic relations: to have at least a minimal relationship with these states and to have something in common. Even that can prove to be some additional motivation, come the UN elections.



**The belongings of diplomats returning to Latvia (2018).** Photo: Dace Mažeika



Gift from Latvia – tapestry “Hope” by Edite Pauls-Vīgnere – being presented to Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations, 20 October 2014. Photo: UN Photo/Amanda Voisard

**It seems that currently there is only one state that Latvia does not have diplomatic relations with and that is Bhutan.**

Indeed, that is the only country in the world with whom Latvia does not have diplomatic relations! That does not mean that we couldn't win Bhutan's vote at the UN elections. Everyone has a vote, but I think that Latvia's successful efforts to establish diplomatic relations is a strong signal to all states showing that we are interested in what's going on outside of our region and that we want to establish relations with others. Right now, Latvia could have the broadest network of diplomatic relations established in the world.

**Formalising diplomatic relations does not, of course, necessarily translate into active political and economic cooperation, but it does open the door to further dialogue. It serves as a foundation for bilateral consultations and for continuing work on issues of mutual interest.**

There is a lot of talk about the effectiveness of the UN and the need to reform it, even more so in recent years in light of Russia's actions within the Security Council, where it vetoes all issues pertaining to its aggression in Ukraine. Latvia has been vocal in its opinion on these matters and has taken part in various initiatives to inch forward greater accountability, transparency

**and effectiveness in the UN. Based on your experience as Ambassador to the UN, how can this process be set in motion in a meaningful way?**

First of all, anything to do with veto power perfectly illustrates the opportunities created through the determined efforts of small states. Look at Liechtenstein, for example. It does not have any direct interests to protect its security as none of its neighbours present any threats to it, but it can be a moral compass, so to speak, and influence other Member States to do the right thing. Thanks to Liechtenstein, several initiatives have succeeded that have ultimately increased the role of the UN General Assembly. This creates positive pressure on the members of the UN Security Council that have veto power to not use it, because they always have to consider the risk that the same issue could end up in front of the General Assembly, and in that case the matter will, to a certain extent, be out of their hands.

I harbour no illusions – the operating principles of the Security Council will remain unchanged. It is no coincidence that five countries hold veto power. There are certain situations where these veto rights are needed. When the interests of a superpower are impacted, that impact will often have a far wider ripple effect. Importantly, though, these interests should not be those of only one state. For small states, the General Assembly plays a huge role – the permanent members of the Security Council live with the understanding that, should they employ their veto rights arbitrarily, the General Assembly may decide otherwise.

**Various ideas have been floated around about enlarging the Security Council, which is closely linked with extending veto rights to any new member states. With such divergent opinions, perhaps it would indeed be best to simply focus on improving the working methods of the Security Council. Many countries are in agreement that Africa should have greater representation on the Security Council. At the same time, around 70–80% of all the issues on the Security Council's agenda relate to problems on the African continent.**

**What do you yourself see as your biggest achievements and personal take-aways from your time in New York? Are there any downsides to the job?**

From a professional point of view, there were three main events that have stayed with me: co-facilitating the World Summit on the Information Society Review, the election of Ilze Brands-Kehris to the UN Human Rights Committee, and Latvia's presidency of the Council of the EU in 2015.

The World Summit on the Information Society Review process was an interesting experience; it was evident in these discussions that states were not fighting over commas or synonyms in the text, but their national interests. When the Latvian Ambassador is on one side of the table and on the other you have the vice-presidents of *Google*, *Disney*, and *Microsoft* – who are there not simply out of formal interest but because they genuinely care about the outcome of the process – then you truly understand that this isn't just a piece of paper. Or when the discussions go on through

the night and the major players (the United States, the European Union, China, and Russia) each have their own interests, it is fascinating to witness how these interests are formulated and how compromises are reached. Leading these negotiations was an opportunity to test my own professional skills in this area. Together with our co-facilitator we managed to have the review documents adopted unanimously by balancing out the interests of the various stakeholders, including the EU. It is crucial for this kind of political document to be meaningful while also being acceptable to everyone. The process was very interesting, almost like a lesson in leading negotiations: how to boil down a huge diversity of opinions into one decision that everyone can agree on and ensure that that decision is not the lowest possible common denominator.

We already spoke about Latvia's Presidency of the EU. That was a time in which Latvia had additional visibility in New York.

In turn, the election of Ilze Brands-Kehris was a very stimulating experience because it required us to be very creative with limited human resources in a very short period leading up to the elections. I remember that for the election day we had procured Latvian candy bars with a picture of Ilze Brands-Kehris on the wrapper for each national delegation. No one else had ever done something like that, and the diplomats liked it. I was very happy that we had our interns to help, because the mission was very short on staff at that time. And what makes me even happier is that one of those interns – Emīls Dombrovskis – has since become a professional diplomat and has returned to New York to represent Latvia.

From a personal point of view, I loved working with the local Latvian community, and I hope that I managed to show them something new, too. I think they also appreciated interacting with our family. I was pleased that we managed to quickly and creatively secure support for creating the United Nations Slavery Memorial – through financial support provided by patron Boriss Teterevs – and that Latvia's name is also featured on the memorial. This gesture was appreciated by countries in other regions as well.

The downside of the job was that following the Presidency of the EU and the Review of the World Summit on the Information Society, the human resources of the mission were once again quickly cut back. As a result, many people who had flourished professionally, and had established contacts with other countries to further strengthen Latvia's diplomatic reach, unfortunately had to leave New York. This was a frustrating period for me as well, because for some time my working capacity was also limited by the severe shortage of staff and having to deal with technical matters.

Another downside is, of course, the toll the job takes on your family. The hours are long, and my work also placed certain duties upon my spouse. You have to find a balance there.

**I have two takeaways from what you've said. First, even with a very small team, the Latvian mission can act creatively to achieve results. Second, to work at the UN in New York, or in multilateral diplomacy as such, it is crucial to have negotiating skills, which can be acquired only through practice.**

I can wholeheartedly agree with you in regard to the abilities of Latvian diplomats, as these were demonstrated excellently. Case in point: in the chairing of the Review of the World Summit on the Information Society, I was supported by one colleague – Elina Volkson – while the Ambassador of the United Arab Emirates had three aides, yet at no point did I feel that Latvia's contribution was in any way less. It was definitely equal.

Leading multilateral negotiations is even more complicated than leading bilateral ones. It is important to get some formal training in negotiating if you have the chance (there are various negotiating training courses available, as well as books, which is a tool I have used myself to find new ideas or confirm the validity of my own ideas), but to a great extent it is a matter of learning as you go. It is important for not only the Ambassador to have this experience, but also the other diplomats, as this is used, for example, in the drafting of UN resolutions. This is the key to ensure that Latvia's interests are taken into account in these resolutions, and also to learn how to consolidate different interests, identify hidden obstacles, and recognise the motives of states. This will raise a diplomat's competence moving forward and also be useful when they become an ambassador.

**What is your advice for young Latvian diplomats looking to make their career in multilateral diplomacy and perhaps the United Nations, specifically?**

First off, not everyone is cut out for multilateral diplomacy. That is simply a fact. It's not that I have a superior view of multilateral diplomacy, because there are things that a so-called "multilateral diplomat" will not be able to achieve as well as a diplomat specialising in bilateral relations. It's just that multilateral and bilateral diplomacy require different sets of skills and provide different outcomes. Multilateral diplomacy does not yield immediate tangible results; if there is any result to speak of, then it may become evident only after five years. Thus, the planning timeline in multilateral diplomacy is much longer.

My advice to young diplomats would be to hone your skills – be it languages or professional skills, knowledge in your area of expertise, or negotiating skills. And

---

My advice to young diplomats would be to hone your skills – be it languages or professional skills, knowledge in your area of expertise, or negotiating skills. And most certainly use all opportunities to learn. Then participate in the work of Latvia's multilateral missions.

---

most certainly use all opportunities to learn. Then participate in the work of Latvia's multilateral missions.

Working in the EU External Action Service, I see that this, too, can provide multilateral experience for young diplomats – this is true even if they end up in a bilateral mission, because EU Delegations are not exclusively bilateral in their nature. My daily work here at the EU Delegation to Moldova is very similar to what I would do if I worked at an international organisation. Starting from the fact that your colleagues come from very different countries, each with its own culture and language, to the fact that there are a huge number of cooperating entities back in Brussels.

**From my experience, a positive aspect of this job is that it gives you the chance to meet people from so many different countries, learn their opinions, and see their diplomatic cultures. Are there any specific takeaways or sensitivities that you think people need to consider in this line of work? You have to be good at making friends, right?**

Yes, indeed. And sometimes the things we were taught in protocol training don't really apply. For example, we were taught that you should never talk about religion or family during a dinner event. But time and again some of the most interesting discussions I've been party to have been about sensitive topics. This is also the best way to understand the mindsets of different cultures. You have to tread carefully, though, not to offend others; therefore, it is crucial to find the right words. The United Nations was certainly an unforgettable experience, because nowhere else will you encounter such a wide array of different languages and cultures, and, naturally, New York is a dream for many.

**Every September, the UN General Assembly High-Level Week is an intense period for the mission in New York, with not only the President of Latvia but also the Minister of Foreign Affairs attending the events. Many heads of state convene at the UN. Do you have any specific memories to share in relation to these weeks?**

For the Ambassador, High-Level Week is like going skydiving. First and foremost, your parachute has to be properly packed before you jump. The work programme for the president or minister has to be planned out with precision. Secondly, you have to be quick on your feet.

Usually the "main prayer" is, of course, for it not to rain that week. If it doesn't rain, then the delegations enjoy walking and that simplifies getting them around. I can tell you a funny story on this. I experienced a situation once where, as the extensively studied paradox goes, "an unstoppable force met an immovable object". One year, the United States Secret Service, which accompanies our President, was, for some reason, quite relaxed, walking pretty freely. As our President was crossing the





Jānis Mažeiks, as Co-facilitator of the 10-Year Review of the World Summit on the Information Society, attending the Internet Governance Forum meeting in João Pessoa, Brazil, 10–13 November 2015.

Photo from personal archives

street, a U.S. police officer tried to stop him by physically grabbing him by the arm. At that point, our President's personal security officer intervened. This is when the unstoppable force met the immovable object. Both actions are forbidden: you may not touch the president of a state, nor may you touch a U.S. police officer. Luckily, the Secret Service came to the rescue to resolve the situation.

**You mentioned several times that working with the diaspora, the local Latvian community, was especially gratifying. Tell us a little about the diaspora in New York! What is the best way to facilitate routine communication and collaboration with the local community?**

There is no “one size fits all” solution to working with the diaspora. The Embassy in Washington, D.C. is responsible for cooperation with the diaspora in the United States. So, I was very happy that the Ambassador in Washington agreed that I would work with the diaspora around New York, because normally this would be done by the consul-general in New York, but Latvia doesn't have a consul-general in New York.

Our diaspora is very active and educated, and they cherish being Latvian. Those are the three keywords that come to mind. Part of the diaspora are descendants of the generation of Latvian exiles and part are recent immigrants, but today both parts

have successfully integrated amongst themselves. In New York, New Jersey and elsewhere on the East Coast, I witnessed how these two parts had merged into a single diaspora. At Latvian Sunday Schools, both students and teachers were from the old and new generations of the diaspora, and there was no division amongst them.

Our family got involved in various ways. First of all, my spouse and I are both Latvian folklore enthusiasts; we shared our experience with the local Latvian community, showing them how we celebrate seasonal festivals in Latvia and doing it together with them. Some of these traditions have now laid roots in New York. Secondly, my spouse had already previously been involved in diaspora education, collaborating with schools, for example, in organising exams for schoolchildren. Together with others, she had set up a Latvian language knowledge assessment system that is aligned with the European language portfolio, and as a result, more advanced teaching methods have been introduced in diaspora schools. Of course, we were often invited to give lectures and speeches at events hosted by the Latvian community in honour of national celebrations or other important days.

**You started a wonderful initiative to bring together all the Latvians working in the United Nations secretariat bodies. It is important to maintain that link, because, driven by their professional career, these people often haven't even made use of the involvement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the mission to the UN in their recruitment processes.**

There are three elements at play here. One: this is a resource for us, diplomats, to find out more about what is going on inside the organisation. Second: it is a resource for them to find out what topics are important for Latvia within the UN and how that aligns with what they are doing. And third: it is a means of establishing mutual contact, because it is not uncommon that in the UN building, where there are thousands of people around, they may not even know about one another's existence until they are brought together like this.

There are not that many Latvians at the UN Secretariat in New York; it is incomparable, for example, to the situation at the European Commission, where the network of Latvian employees is much bigger. I don't think that's a bad thing. It reflects our priorities, because the European Union is a much higher priority for us, however important the work of the United Nations may be. Yet it is crucial for Latvia to have its own people inside the UN system.

Rita Ruduša

## UNESCO: When Words and Values Collide

The often-asked question “what is a representative from Latvia doing at the UNESCO IPDC?” can be answered in a single word – counterbalance. The Latvian representative’s duties are various, their communication is intense, and the primary objective basically simple: to offset Russian efforts. Latvia’s third mandate on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) ended in the autumn of 2023, and throughout this last term, but especially since February 2022, the IPDC was a battlefield, albeit a subdued and polite one, where two value systems clashed. The European side, in which Latvia was an active participant, upheld the notion that freedom of press is a pillar of democracy to be protected, while Russia and its handful of allies deemed the media an instrument of influence to be controlled.

### Offender at the table

Journalist safety is a crucial prerequisite for the implementation of the universal, inalienable rights of freedom of expression and freedom of the media as laid down in Article 19 of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights; while this may seem obvious, experience in the IPDC shows that it is not the case for everyone. States have a duty to protect journalists by guaranteeing safe working conditions for them, yet this responsibility is often neglected. For example, today, the absolute majority (86%) of murders of journalists go unsolved, and the number of non-lethal attacks and cyber-mobbing incidents is on the rise, especially against female journalists. Meanwhile, the main offending states still sit at the big, round table of the IPDC at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris (overall, there are 38 Member States represented in the IPDC<sup>1</sup>), including Russia. The IPDC produces regular reports with

---

<sup>1</sup> Currently, the members of the UNESCO IPDC are: Austria, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Chile, Columbia, Congo, Cuba, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, Estonia, France, Ghana, Guinea, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Madagascar, Mongolia, Namibia, the Netherlands, Norway, Oman, Pakistan, the Philippines, Qatar, Russia, Switzerland, Thailand, Togo, Ukraine, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Uruguay, Venezuela, Yemen.



The author of this essay preparing for her intervention during a UNESCO IPDC session on 25 November 2022. Photo from personal archives

recommendations for the Member States of UNESCO on matters pertaining to freedom of expression, media plurality and journalist safety, and it is the discussion of the wording of these reports that sets the stage for the diplomatic, but nonetheless bitter, clashes among the members of the IPDC.

Let us begin by identifying a depressing trend: violence against journalists has increased dramatically in recent years. The UNESCO Report on Journalist Safety and Danger of Impunity<sup>2</sup> drafted for the IPDC found that the number of journalist deaths had increased by 50% as compared to the previous report. Eighty-six journalists were killed in 2022 (55 in 2021). Audrey Azoulay, UNESCO Director-General, called these statistics “alarming”, which translated from diplomatic-speak means that there is reason for serious alarm.

“Authorities must step up their efforts to stop these crimes and ensure their perpetrators are punished, because indifference is a major factor in this climate of violence,” Director-General Azoulay said<sup>3</sup>.

The number of journalists killed in the war in Ukraine is dismal; of course, an active war zone is objectively an area of increased risk for journalists, but in the case of the war in Ukraine, an additional factor is the fact that instead of protecting journalists, the sign “Press” on a vehicle, helmet or bullet-proof vest actually makes them targets for the Russian military.<sup>4</sup> However, three quarters of journalist killings have taken place in countries where there are no armed conflicts raging; half of all of these deaths were registered in Latin America. Many have been killed outside of their professional duties – while travelling, in parking lots or other public venues – while others still have been killed in their own homes. Therefore, as the report finds,

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, “Director General’s Report on Journalist Safety and Danger of Impunity,” viewed on 30.08.2024, <https://www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/dg-report-safety-journalists>.

<sup>3</sup> “Killings of journalists up 50 per cent in 2022: UNESCO”, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/01/1132507>

<sup>4</sup> The Atlantic Council, “Russia faces fresh accusations of targeting journalists in Ukraine,” 16 January 2024, accessed on 30.06.2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-faces-fresh-accusations-of-targeting-journalists-in-ukraine/>.

that “there are no safe spaces for journalists, even in their spare time”.<sup>5</sup> The reason for these attacks is the journalists’ work relating to investigating corruption, organised crime and environmental issues.

Russia has long been at the top of the list of countries with the highest incidences of journalist killings. The majority of victims there have been journalists who regularly reported about corruption, human rights violations and similar issues inconvenient to the regime. Since Valdimir Putin came to power in 1999, at least 25 journalists have been killed, including seven from the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*: Anna Politkovskaya and six of her colleagues. Russia is ranked at number 162 out of 180 countries included in the World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders.<sup>6</sup> While in recent years the number of targeted killings of journalists in Russia has decreased, the reason for this is not better working conditions for journalists or excellent work by the authorities in prosecuting the perpetrators. It is quite simply the fact that the space for independent journalism in Russia has shrunk, and the absolute majority of independent media have left the country, while those remaining have censored themselves and no longer publish articles criticising those in power, so killing is no longer needed as a silencing tool. The UNESCO report indicates that governments often use the fight against misinformation as a cover for persecuting journalists by creating a toxic environment for journalistic activity. The dismal statistics at home and the number of unsolved journalist murders was not an obstacle for Russia to take part in the informal Group of Friends on the Safety of Journalists, which was set up under the auspices of UNESCO in 2016 for the purpose of coordinating the opinions of like-minded states and issuing joint statements on the rights and safety of journalists. Despite Russia’s statistics on violence and extensive history of restricting freedom of the press even before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and therefore its utter incongruity with this “like-mindedness”, the other members of the group only finally decided to expel Russia after February 2022. But Russia still sits at the IPDC table, because the composition of the forum can only be altered through a new election. Furthermore, the Russian delegate, Mikhail Gusman, formerly Deputy Director-General of Russian state news agency TASS,

---

The dismal statistics at home and the number of unsolved journalist murders was not an obstacle for Russia to take part in the informal Group of Friends on the Safety of Journalists.

---

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, “Director General’s Report on Journalist Safety and Danger of Impunity,” accessed 30.08.2024, <https://www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/dg-report-safety-journalists>.

<sup>6</sup> Reporters Without Borders, “Country files, Russia,” accessed on 30.06.2024, <https://rsf.org/en/country/russia>.



The author of this essay speaking at the UNESCO forum “Online violence against women journalists – How to do better?”, Paris, 25 October 2023. Photo from personal archives

has been elected to the Bureau of the IPDC – its governing body, which allocates funding for media projects in developing states.

As can be concluded from proposals and objections submitted by Russia, its main strategic goals at the IPDC are to prevent the naming of any specific groups in the documents published by the IPDC (e.g., “female journalists”), to reinforce Russia’s influence over media in developing countries (e.g., through generous contributions for the work of the IPDC), and to soften in general the wording on reducing impunity for governments. Tactically, Russia’s approach is as creative as it gets: it will question procedures by indicating microscopic discrepancies in the English and French versions of the Charter of the IPDC, delay debates by purposely skipping the lunch break to tire out the rest of the participants, or openly troll representatives of other countries with statements that are from another century and inappropriate to the diplomatic space (for example, calling female experts from other countries “smarty pants” or “babe”). Russia has just the one active supporter – Cuba – although there are plenty of delegates at the forum who do not object to Russia’s proposals outright.

In order to neutralise Russia, the EU Member States represented on the IPDC form a group of friends that coordinate their proposals ahead of important meetings, drafting several versions to prepare for the possibility that Russia will employ some

tactical measure which would require a workaround or compromise to be found. For example, at the IPDC meeting in the autumn of 2023, where a decision would be taken on the aforementioned report of the Director-General, the group of friends, headed by Austria, selected two key terms that it was not willing to back down from, those being “non-lethal attacks” on journalists and “gender-based violence”, first and foremost meaning against women journalists. These keywords closely coincided with Latvia’s priorities of consistently advocating for the protection of female journalists from attacks online and elsewhere. Both of these two specific references made it into the final document,<sup>7</sup> but delays, last minute proposals and constant asides irrelevant to the matter at hand (many of these being false statements about the Baltic States) prolonged and complicated the process, requiring focus and persistence from the group of friends.

In order to maintain that focus and frame of mind, Austria, as the leading country of the group of friends, had created a WhatsApp group where every new Russian proposal was discussed in real time and next steps were planned. To give a brief glimpse behind-the-scenes of the IPDC, allow me to quote a rapid-fire exchange over a surprise proposal by Russia to allow Member States to contribute to IPDC projects “in kind” (meaning: to create a network of Russian experts in developing countries who will train local journalists).

A: “They want to be part of funding the IPDC at all costs.”

J: “In-kind contribution=Russian experts.”

L: “Could we say that we haven’t seen it [the proposal] before and that it’s substantial? [therefore, according to the charter, it’s too late to submit it]?”

J: “This one is certainly substantial. Maybe someone who is still going to take the floor could express regret such a substantive amendment is being presented only now?”

I will just add that the regret was expressed by the Latvian and Lithuanian delegates, who had already raised their country name plates to ask for the floor ahead of time, knowing that whatever the Russian delegate may say, they will certainly need to respond. Such intense communication over a few words or sentences may seem exaggerated, but just a few words can be the difference between the two systems of values that clash daily at the IPDC. Had the friends’ group not rallied together to protect journalists against non-lethal attacks, a huge journalist safety issue would have gone unnamed, and that would have been a green light for the countries that indulge in such tactics to silence journalists. Had it not maintained the reference to female journalists in the recommendations, the interests of this group, too, would

---

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, “Report of the Intergovernmental Council of the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) on its activities in 2022–2023,” accessed on 30.06.2024, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000387299>.

have been ignored, and Russia's position that there is no such thing as particularly vulnerable groups of journalists would have been validated. And, lastly, had the wording "in kind" not been noticed in time and the idea to write it into documents not cut off at the root in debates, principles of Russian-style obedient journalism would already be being taught to media throughout developing countries.

## Exporting expertise

The UNESCO IPDC is the only intergovernmental programme in the United Nations system for media development, which, alongside reports and decisions supporting media freedom, also provides financial support. The IPDC allocates about USD 1.5 million per year for the implementation of public service media projects; this money comes from donating member states, which, as of 2020, also includes Latvia. Even though the total amounts for media projects are relatively small, in countries with a fragile media market and conditions unfavourable for the development of independent journalism, even a project worth USD 20,000–30,000 can go a

---

Latvia is not only a donor country to the UNESCO media support programme, but also a knowledge exporter.

---

long way. This is especially important for countries that are given a wide berth by conventional media development funds, such as Ethiopia, which has experienced several armed conflicts, Columbia and Bolivia, which have proven extremely dangerous to journalists, or Uruguay, the anti-champion in information availability.

Latvia is not only a donor country to the UNESCO media support programme, but also a knowledge exporter. Unlike the absolute majority of states in the IPDC, Latvia was represented on the programme for two consecutive terms by sectoral specialists, meaning journalists: from 2015 until 2019, Latvia's representative was Sanita Jemberga, co-founder of the Re:Baltica investigative journalism centre, and from 2019 until 2023 it was myself.<sup>8</sup> Having an intimate understanding of the work of a journalist, the Latvian delegates distinguished themselves during discussions over IPDC decisions with clear and principled debating language and substantiated objections against imprecise (or, in Russia's case, often untruthful) wordings and statements, whilst also creating an image of Latvia as a knowledgeable expert that upholds values. Due to her high level of expertise and international publicity gained in the context of the IPDC, Sanita Jemberga took

---

<sup>8</sup> During Latvia's period of participation in the IPDC in 2003, its national representative was Imants Freibergs, who was at the time the Head of the Information and Communications Technology Association of Latvia.





Questions from the audience at the forum “Safeguarding Trust in Media”, organised by Latvia in collaboration with UNESCO and Manouba University; Tunisia, 30 October 2023.

Photo from personal archives

part in bilateral projects in Central Asia, where she also provided expertise for UNESCO projects, while I took part in the UNESCO forum on the safety of women journalists and a media literacy project in Tunisia and the broader North Africa region.

An excellent example of this is the forum “Safeguarding Trust in Media”, which was held in Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, in October 2023; the idea for the forum was born in bilateral contacts with leading academics in media studies in Tunisia – the Manouba University *Institut de Press et des Sciences de l’Information* (IPSI), as well as the EU’s Tunisia Media Support Programme (PAMT2) and the UNESCO Regional Office for the Maghreb Region. For Latvia, this was the first international conference on media literacy and media development it had ever organised in this region and an opportunity to promote its recognisability as an exporter of media literacy competence, while for Tunisia it was an opportunity to expand its network of available experts and look at media literacy and trust issues from a new perspective, while also gaining new creative inspiration. Latvia exported not just knowledge to North Africa, but also the format of the conference: the goal being to not only encourage media policy change and media development but also to provide inspiration and practical

advice to media professionals on content creation. The first day of the conference was aimed at a broader audience: the heads of media outlets, academics, non-governmental organisations from Tunisia and the Maghreb countries, the diplomatic corps, and representatives of the government of Tunisia; it focused on the latest surveys about public trust in the media in North Africa and ways to promote greater trust through inclusive content and media literacy initiatives. In turn, the second day of the conference was a practical “show and tell” discussion, with journalism students and young media professionals talking about the best examples of media literacy projects implemented by the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence, including an exciting game-show called “Internet Academy” (*Interneta akadēmija*) that was created in collaboration with Latvian Television. As a result, today in Tunisia and the broader region, Latvia is closely associated with the hashtag #MILskills (meaning “media and information literacy skills”), and shortly after the forum in Tunis I was invited to participate in a historic event: the Nefzawa City debate festival, held for the first time by the Nefzawa Academy civic organisation in the southern Tunisian city of Kebili, where I led a masterclass on audio deep-fakes during elections and also took part in a panel discussion about the impact of artificial intelligence on freedom of the press.

Principled and competent – that is the legacy Latvia has created for itself through its work at the UNESCO IPDC and the related export of expertise. Every time the Latvian delegate raised the country’s name plate to ask for the floor at a debate, and every time the Latvian expert provided their input – be it in media development projects in Central Asia or media literacy events in North Africa – we clearly demonstrated that for Latvia Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is not just words on paper. We live by these principles ourselves, and we are willing to share our experience, which could help others integrate these principles into their daily lives: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

Aiga Rūrāne

## Latvia and the Implementation of Global Health Goals

My first contact with the World Health Organisation (WHO) dates back to the early 1990s, when I was working in the Health Department of the Ministry of Welfare: first as a desk officer, and later as Head of the Division for Mothers and Children. The Ministry of Health Protection had been merged with the Ministry of Welfare and was housed in a building on Skolas Street in Riga. Latvia had just become an independent, full-fledged member of the WHO, and cooperation could thus begin.

That was a period of extensive reforms in all areas, including healthcare. There were so many urgent issues to be solved: how to set up the healthcare system of an independent state that had for many years been subjugated to another state and management style; how healthcare should be financed; how to set up the education system for doctors, nurses and other medical practitioners; how to create a system of general practitioners; how to improve the health of mothers and newborns; how to decrease incidences of tuberculosis and mortality therefrom; how to establish an efficient system for emergency medical services. Normunds Zemvaldis, Minister of Health at the time, brought into the Ministry many new faces – doctors and nurses, mostly with no prior experience in policy-making and management but with abounding energy, enthusiasm, and a willingness to learn and be part of the change. At that time, a lot of support came from the Nordic countries that sent us their experts, who offered training and courses in their countries. This was a time of intense learning: new terminology in English, the fundamentals of modern-day public health policy, and the experience of other countries. Every day there were lively discussions at the Ministry, often long into the night, with copious amounts of coffee consumed under a cloud of cigarette smoke (back then, many smoked, and smoking indoors was not prohibited). I remember very well my brothers- and sisters-in-arms of the time, who I could always turn to for advice or a shoulder to lean on: my always jolly colleagues professors Juris Leja and Aivars Zirnis, paediatrician Ilze Skutkēviča, Egīls Lavendelis, who would later become a paediatric surgeon, and infectologist Ilze Vingre. With the support of the Swiss government, paediatrician Mārcis Cīrulis and myself established the first perinatal care centres in Latvia. There were so many challenges to overcome – everything was new.

Working on elaborating the mother-child healthcare programme, I first began my collaboration with WHO experts, which would expand and continue for many years throughout the drafting of other legislative and policy documents. With the dissolution of the USSR and the geopolitical shifts of the early 1990s, Latvia emerged as a free and independent Member State of the UN and the WHO. In a brief stretch of time, the WHO gained several new member states in the European region that had once been part of the USSR or Yugoslavia. Change was needed everywhere because the healthcare systems in these states were outdated and stagnant, they were not suited to the emerging challenges of the day. All of the new member states were asking the WHO for help. This was also a turning point in the work of the WHO; initially established for the elaboration of international standards and norms in public health, the organisation's direct cooperation with Member States developed slowly, over time, alongside growing demand from the Member States themselves.

## WHO representation

One of the main functions of the WHO is to provide technical support on health policy and public health issues. Today, there are WHO Country Offices in 152 countries, including Latvia. Cooperation between the WHO and a Member State is based on an analysis of the specific situation in that country. Having assessed resources and needs, an agreement is concluded on the provision of technical assistance in specific areas of public health, and funding is also allotted. The WHO Country Offices play a crucial role in ensuring that cooperation with ministries of health and sectoral partners facilitates the achievement of global health goals through the implementation of national and regional health plans. In the name of these goals, the WHO works with partners in health and other areas to implement the principle "health in all policies".

Ensuring and coordinating WHO expert missions is one of the ways that the WHO provides technical support. WHO expert missions work closely with the best national specialists in joint discussions to analyse and assess policies in specific areas of public health and provide an independent insight and recommendations for further steps to be taken based on evidence and the experience of other countries. An important ability of the WHO that is highly appreciated by Member States is providing a neutral platform that makes it possible to bring into the conversation other sectors not related to health and thus find solutions to sometimes very pressing issues.

---

Similarly to Estonia, Lithuania and some other countries with small territories, the WHO Office in Latvia was compact, with just a handful of employees, but the role it played was immense.

---

When decision-making hits a wall for one reason or another and there is no more forward motion, often enough it is because the partners involved have differing views. In such cases, outside collegiate assistance is invaluable.

The WHO Liaison Office in Latvia was opened in 1992, and Normunds Zemvaldis became the first Liaison Officer, although he was shortly thereafter appointed as Minister of Health and could not combine the two posts. Afterwards, the Liaison Office was headed by Georgs Andrejevs, who was soon accredited as an ambassador. As of August 1995, I took over the management of the Liaison Office. For a brief period of time, the Office was housed at the Ministry of Welfare, later moving to the premises of the Latvian Medical Association, and as of 2004 it has been working out of the UN building in Old Riga.

Looking back today, I believe that WHO support was most crucial for Latvia in the period from the restoration of independence until its accession to the European Union. Many international organisations actively provided support to Latvia. Various UN agencies were extensively represented in Latvia: the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDCP), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) all provided support to the government within each of their areas of expertise and coordinated the joint action of all UN agencies. The World Bank also implemented an extensive aid programme supporting the healthcare sector.

Similarly to Estonia, Lithuania and some other countries with small territories, the WHO Office in Latvia was compact, with just a handful of employees, but the role it played was immense. The local Liaison Office plans and coordinates the implementation of the bilateral cooperation agreement between the WHO Regional Office for Europe and the Ministry of Health by supplying the necessary resources and coordinating the work done locally with the three levels of the Organisation (the headquarters in Geneva, the Regional Office for Europe in Copenhagen, and the local Liaison Office).

Over the course of all these years, the WHO has been actively involved in nearly all crucial public health matters in Latvia, including the elaboration of public health strategies, HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis strategies, policies for restricting the use of tobacco and alcohol, environmental health policies, promoting reproductive and sexual health as well as maternal and child health, establishing a healthcare financing model, promoting mental health, elaborating legislation on patients' rights, promoting the One Health approach to reduce antimicrobial resistance, and so much more!

Cooperation with the WHO at a political and technical level has been and continues to be of great importance for Latvia in protecting public health. All activities are coordinated and implemented in close cooperation with the Ministry of Health and its various departments. Collaboration with professional doctors' associations, the Latvian Medical Association, NGOs such as *Papardes zieds* (an organisation for



**Aiga Rūrāne signing the official oath before Dr Jo Asvall, WHO Regional Director for Europe; it was customary at the time for newly appointed heads of WHO Liaison Offices to sign such an oath. WHO Headquarters in Geneva, 1999. Photo from personal archives**

family planning and sexual health), the Latvian Diabetes Association, the Support Group for People Living with HIV/AIDS (AGIHAS), and the HIV/AIDS Association have also been successful. In turn, the Public Health Agency and later the Centre for Disease Prevention and Control cooperated with the WHO on technical issues pertaining to specific areas of public health.

I vividly recall the turbulent period of working on the Law on the Rights of the Patient, which generated extensive public debate. Many physicians were perplexed by the idea that patients need special legislation for their protection and wondered whether doctors would also get one. Swedish experts were of great help in this regard, as they had already advanced on the matter much further and were able to provide competent, impartial expertise. The next step was establishing a Patients' Ombudsman's Office, which functioned successfully for many years (*inter alia* with technical support from the WHO) and significantly contributed to raising awareness and improving legislation regarding patients' rights.

Another vivid memory is the constant work to reduce risk factors for the spread of non-infectious diseases by promoting less daily consumption of salt and sugar and prohibiting the use of trans fats in foodstuffs. Workshops were organised for the food industry on how to tweak recipes and production technologies to use less salt

and remove trans fatty acids from food processing. There was a lot of pushback, and the going was very tough.

The WHO has also regularly supported Latvia at both a political and technical level in the course of restricting the use of tobacco and alcohol with a particular focus on protecting the health of children and youths. The tobacco and alcohol lobby has always been a strong one, so recommendations and regulations issued by the WHO are of great importance for states. An example of this is the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which was adopted in 2003. Signed by nearly all countries, including Latvia, it is an important international, legally binding regulatory document aimed at improving public health and reducing the harm caused by tobacco.

Altogether, there has been a joint effort of many Latvian health politicians and public health specialists that has slowly but surely led to a gradual improvement in public health indicators. For example, rules of the Cabinet of Ministers adopted in 2006 prohibiting the sale and distribution of sweetened beverages in schools have significantly reduced their consumption among children and youths. In recognition of this achievement in promoting public health, Latvia even received an award from the WHO Regional Office for Europe; the award was presented to Gundars Bērziņš, Minister of Health at that time. In 2012, maternal and perinatal mortality analysis was introduced in Latvia using WHO methodology; this was made possible through the collaboration of various institutions and sectors under the supervision of the Ministry of Health together with the Latvian Association of Gynaecologists and Obstetricians, supported by WHO experts. At that time, Latvia had one of the highest maternal and perinatal mortality indicators in Europe, and a systematic approach to analysing these indicators was an urgent necessity. The introduction of this analysis and its implementation over the course of many years was, in great part, the result of dedicated work and efforts by professor Gunta Lazdāne, Advisor on Sexual and Reproductive Health at the WHO Regional Office for Europe.

During regular meetings with the Minister of Health – as well as Members of the Saeima, the Minister of Finance, and the Prime Minister – WHO experts have actively advocated for healthcare to be named a priority and its budget increased. Annual reports produced by the European Commission have recommended the same. Unfortunately, advice on the healthcare budget issued by international organisations went unheard for many years.

WHO technical support measures are selected based on the targets that have been set. A successful example is the promotion of cooperation among the Baltic

---

Another vivid memory is the constant work to reduce risk factors for the spread of non-infectious diseases by promoting less daily consumption of salt and sugar and prohibiting the use of trans fats in foodstuffs.

---

States by holding annual WHO-Baltic State dialogues on health policy, which are focused on a specific topic each year. This format of cooperation provided by the WHO was first started in 2004 with the aim of facilitating contacts between Baltic health policy-makers and relevant sectoral experts who could work with WHO experts to solve topical health policy issues, such as those relating to the organisation of primary healthcare, the prices of medicines, the benefits of integrated care, or healthcare financing models. The issues have evolved along with the changing times. Every year, one of the three Baltic States takes on the organisational responsibilities, while the WHO and the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies elaborate the content by bringing in international experts and presenting the latest scientific studies and international experience. These annual meetings of Baltic experts have not lost their importance because they also provide an opportunity for personal and professional networking that has proven to be very useful in resolving urgent matters in the course of daily work.

Latvia's involvement in the WHO's international cooperation networks has been very important and useful. Excellent examples of this are the Health Promoting Schools Network, the Healthy Cities Network, and the Small Countries Initiative; participation and often also financial support for Latvia's representatives to attend training and courses given by the WHO, exchanges of experience with colleagues from other countries and participation in international fora and studies. This has been a crucial investment in strengthening national public health capacity in Latvia (especially during the first years after the restoration of independence), and it has also facilitated Latvia's comprehensive integration into the international public health community.

## Health for All

“Health for All” is a fundamental and founding principle of the WHO. As the WHO marks its 75th anniversary in 2024, this principle remains as important as ever. The “Health for All” movement became especially popular in the 1980s and 1990s, when it gained the attention of many layers of European society. Inspired by this concept, a range of crucial health policy documents were adopted in many countries and new global initiatives emerged that would influence public opinion in Europe and throughout the world for decades to come.

A declaration on primary healthcare was first adopted in 1978 at an international conference in Alma-Ata (today Almaty) in Kazakhstan. It urged governments to take immediate action to ensure accessibility and equality in healthcare, or “Health for All”. This was the first declaration of such reach to stress the importance of equality in primary care. The Declaration of Alma-Ata is still considered to be one of the key turning points of the 20th century in public health as it identifies primary healthcare



as the basic element in attaining the targets set by the “Health for All” movement at a global level.

In 1986, the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion was adopted at the first International Conference on Health Promotion held in Ottawa, Canada. This inspired and launched a new global movement regarding the global role of health promotion, and it launched many new initiatives at the global, national and regional levels. The Ottawa Charter was fundamentally aimed at strengthening the factors that facilitate health, ensuring equal opportunities for all, and emphasising the role of cross-sectoral cooperation in achieving the “Health for All” targets. The Ottawa Charter begot the Healthy Cities movement, which quickly spread and gained popularity around the world. Being a healthy city means not only developing health infrastructure and ensuring accessibility, but it is also a political commitment to foster an environment that promotes health and involves local residents in decisions.

The Health Promoting Schools Network is another global initiative that was inspired by the Ottawa Charter. It is still a global initiative today, and it has been recognised as a strategic tool in the context of general development and the “Health for All” policy. The Health Promoting Schools standards serve as a foundation for cooperation between the health and education sectors, involving students, teachers, parents, healthcare providers and local governments in a joint effort to ensure that everyone’s health is promoted at a given school.

International events and development have also left an impact on health policy in Latvia. The “Health for All” movement was reflected in policy documents of the time. The Declaration of Alma-Ata inspired a shift in mindset on the role of primary care and thus facilitated the creation of the institution of general practitioners in Latvia; the Ottawa Charter facilitated the creation and development of the Centre for Health Promotion; under the leadership of professor Igors Puškarevs, and later Vizma Miķelsone, a teacher at Krimulda Secondary School, a pilot project was implemented in the early 1990s in which the first 10 schools in Latvia joined the Health Promoting Schools Initiative. The Healthy Cities Initiative was launched in Latvia in 1993, led by the Saldus City Council and its Executive Director Ina Behmane.

Today, the National Healthy Cities and Municipalities Network and the National Health Promoting Schools Network are overseen and coordinated in Latvia by the Centre for Disease Prevention and Control; all 43 municipalities of Latvia are members of the national network, while two cities (Riga and Jūrmala) have been issued the status of “healthy cities” by the WHO. Membership in the National Healthy Cities and Municipalities Network is voluntary and free of charge. It is a movement open to any municipality that wishes to be involved in promoting health, so long as it fulfils certain criteria on health promotion and submits an application. A total of 123 schools in Latvia have currently joined the National Health Promoting Schools Network. This network is open to general and vocational schools that provide primary and/or secondary education, as well as preschools that wish to implement health-promoting measures.



From the left: Jurijs Perevoščikovs, Director of the Infectious Diseases Risk Analysis and Prevention Department of the Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, Aiga Rūrāne, Head of the World Health Organisation's Liaison Office in Latvia, Egita Pole, Deputy State Secretary of the Ministry of Health, Ludmila Viksna, Chief Infectologist of the Riga East University Hospital, and Armands Ploriņš, Director of the State Emergency Medical Service, at a press conference on the Ebola virus and the preparedness of Latvia's healthcare system. Photo: LETA

Years of implementing the “Health for All” policy had a positive effect on understanding and shaping health and social policies in Latvia by moving them towards creating an inclusive society and reducing inequality. Focusing on human rights, an ethical framework of healthcare and evidence-based health policy are the fundamental principles of the WHO, and it constantly advocates for the practical application of these principles in the health policies of its Member States.

## Latvia's involvement in WHO studies

The WHO has performed numerous studies since Latvia joined the organisation. Allow me to mention just a few key ones for which I have had the honour of being part of the development and implementation process in Latvia. These studies are still being performed regularly – the results are analysed and recommendations for policy adjustments are made based on them.

In Latvia, WHO studies are coordinated, performed and supervised by the Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, headed by Director Mārtiņš Dimants.

In 1982, the international Health Behaviour among School-aged Children Study (HSBC) was launched with the active involvement of the WHO. Latvia joined the study in 1990. The project initiator in Latvia was Ilze Kalniņš, a professor at Toronto University (Canada), and from 1990 until 2000 the main coordinator for the study in Latvia was professor Ieva Ranka from Riga Stradiņš University (formerly the Medical Academy of Latvia). I have had the honour of working alongside both of these distinguished professors for years.

In 1998, a study was performed on the factors and behaviours affecting sexual and reproductive health in Latvia. This study was inspired by the 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo (Egypt), which the Latvian delegation attended. Subsequent studies were developed in 2003 and 2011 with the technical and financial support of the WHO and in cooperation with other UN agencies. The aim of the study was to assess the dynamics of the reproductive health habits of the population in Latvia by asking respondents to provide a self-evaluation of their health, to assess disease prevention and contraception use to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, and to assess the impact of national policy on reproductive health indicators. It was a pleasure to see this important study being restored after a long hiatus in 2024 under the leadership of Anda Ķīvīte-Urtāne, Associate Professor of the Institute of Public Health of Riga Stradiņš University.

In 1999, in collaboration with the U.S. Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, the WHO launched the Global Tobacco Youth Survey as part of its newly established Global Tobacco Surveillance System. This study looks at internationally comparable data on the use of tobacco products among teenagers. The Global Tobacco Youth Survey contains a questionnaire with mandatory and optional questions for Member States. Five such surveys have been carried out in Latvia: in 2002, 2007, 2011, 2014 and 2019. The aim of the Global Tobacco Youth Survey in Latvia is to identify the prevalence of tobacco product use among 13-, 14- and 15-year-old students, to study the smoking habits of this group and forecast the risk of youths taking up smoking, and to identify the motivations for smoking and the factors that affect smoking-related behaviour. The survey in Latvia is supervised by Biruta Velika, Senior Researcher of the Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.

As of 2001, the Health Behaviour among School-aged Children Study in Latvia has been coordinated by Iveta Pudule, Senior Researcher at the Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. In Latvia, surveys for the Health Behaviour Study are performed with the support of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education and Science in the following age groups: 11-, 13- and 15-year-old students. The aim of the Health Behaviour among School-aged Children Study is to collect information and raise awareness about the health and lifestyles of school-aged children. The results

of the study are used to obtain information about children's health self-assessments and their health-related behaviours, to draft evidence-based health policies and health promotion campaigns, and to promote an exchange of information among the countries participating in the study. In Latvia, the results of all these studies are analysed and published, and dedicated specialist discussions and press conferences are held. Currently, 48 countries and regions in Europe and North America take part in the study.

In 2007, under the leadership of Biruta Velika, Senior Researcher at the Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, the WHO European Child Obesity Surveillance Initiative was launched in Latvia. The aim of this study is to analyse and distribute information for planning, elaborating and implementing child obesity prevention campaigns, and it is still ongoing. Child obesity is a widespread and rapidly growing problem throughout the world, especially in Europe. In Latvia, the study is done once every three years. The results are analysed, recommendations are issued, and national reports are drafted.

In 2011, with the support of the Nordic Council of Ministers, with methodological support from the WHO Regional Office for Europe and with the participation of the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and Science, and the Ministry

---

Child obesity is a widespread and rapidly growing problem throughout the world, especially in Europe.

---

of Welfare along with various other government institutions and non-governmental organisations, a study entitled Adverse Childhood Experience of Young Adults in Latvia was launched. This was the first study at such a scale in Latvia: 18-year-old youths studying at secondary and vocational schools were surveyed in five cities in Latvia. I vividly recall the public and media reactions when the results were published – people were shocked. The study gained extensive public atten-

tion; its report revealed that violence against children is a widespread phenomenon in Latvia, and there is an urgent need for policies setting out the responsibilities and involvement of all relevant sectors and an action plan. I remember a large discussion being held at the Saeima with the active participation of four ministers, WHO experts, and all the competent government institutions and NGOs. Everyone was committed to getting involved and rectifying the situation. UN agencies launched an extensive campaign in Latvia to raise awareness about domestic violence; in collaboration with the Latvian Association of Gynaecologists and Obstetricians, the WHO published the first guidelines for healthcare professionals on recognising the consequences of sexual abuse.

## WHO Collaborating Centres

WHO Collaborating Centres are special institutions established and authorised by the Secretary-General of the WHO for the purpose of creating an international network for cooperation that supports WHO programmes, thus providing benefits for all countries. Spread across the world, these Collaborating Centres are a great resource for the WHO: they provide additional human resources, information, know-how and action to promote and complement the work done by WHO proxies. The main idea is that the know-how accumulated at WHO Collaborating Centres can be used for the benefit of all Member States. Usually, these centres are departments of national research institutes, universities, laboratories, hospitals or ministries of health. Collaborating Centres also create more opportunities to exchange information and expand technical cooperation with other institutions, especially at an international level.

There is a specific procedure and specific criteria by which the WHO selects, assesses, monitors and approves WHO Collaborating Centres around the world. Currently, there are 270 Collaborating Centres in 34 WHO Member States in Europe, which accounts for 33% of the total.

Latvia has had three Collaborating Centres: The Oral Hygiene Centre (in the 1990s) headed by professor Ilga Urtāne at Riga Stradiņš University, the WHO Collaborating Centre for Research and Training in the Management of Multidrug-Resistant Tuberculosis (since 2004), and the WHO Collaborating Centre for Health Professional Education (since 2022) headed by professor Inga Millere.

The WHO Collaborating Centre for Research and Training in Management of Multidrug-Resistant Tuberculosis (MDR-TB) was first officially designated in 2004, with its designation being renewed in 2009, 2013, 2017 and 2021. This is possibly the only WHO Collaborating Centre in Europe working with MDR-TB issues. Experts from the Centre take part in WHO activities in countries with incidences of MDR-TB to help introduce programmes for limiting the spread of tuberculosis, draft training materials for professionals, and take part in studies. Since 2004, more than 3,000 participants from 60 countries have taken part in the international training courses given by this WHO Collaborating Centre. I recall with pleasure my successful cooperation with Vaira Leimane, who headed the Centre for many years, and later on with Andris Cīrulis and the excellent specialists working at the Centre, enthusiastic colleagues who are fiercely loyal to their work. Associate professor Ričards Zaļeskis, who was a WHO regional TB consultant at the time, played an important role in the development of the Centre. The Centre received a letter of recognition from the WHO Regional Office for Europe in 2015. I am genuinely happy to say that the cooperation platform established by the WHO has been an excellent opportunity for our specialists to make Latvia's name known around the world by taking part in limiting the spread of multidrug-resistant tuberculosis in Europe and the world, as this still remains a widespread and deadly disease.

## Latvia within the WHO management structure

The WHO is managed by the World Health Assembly, which is the highest decision-making authority of the Organisation, and the Executive Board, which implements the decisions taken by the Assembly. The Organisation is headed by a Secretary-General, who is confirmed in office by the Assembly upon the recommendation of the Executive Board.

The Board consists of 34 individuals with technical qualifications in healthcare, each appointed by a Member State elected for this purpose by the World Health Assembly. Member States are elected to the Board for a term of three years. Latvia has had the honour of being elected to the Executive Board of the WHO once – from 2006 until 2009, when it was represented on the Board by Viktors Jaksons, former Minister of Health. This was an excellent opportunity for Latvia to be part of global decision-making on public health matters.

Similarly to other UN agencies, the work environment at the WHO is multinational, diverse and extremely interesting, providing extensive opportunities to learn from other cultures and enrich yourself through this interaction. There have not been, nor are there currently, many Latvians working in WHO bodies. The reason for this may be the intense workload and constantly being away from Latvia.

I have had the honour and pleasure of working alongside wonderful, highly professional colleagues from many different countries. I am genuinely grateful for the opportunity to work with so many excellent Latvian colleagues; it has been a brilliant period of passionate work that has been extremely valuable for my professional and personal growth for many years. For many years, associate professor Ričards Zaļeskis was the regional TB consultant and professor Gunta Lazdāne was the regional consultant on reproductive and sexual health at the WHO Regional Office for Europe in Copenhagen. Later, this small group of Latvians was joined by Margrieta Langins, who works in the Nursing and Midwifery Programme, Antons Mozaļevskis, who started out in the HIV/AIDS programme at the Copenhagen Office but is now working at the WHO HQ in Geneva, former head of the WHO Liaison Office in Latvia Uldis Mitenbergs, who is now at the WHO Regional Office for Europe, and Karīna Zālīte, who is the current WHO Liaison Officer in Latvia.

I also certainly need to mention the administrative assistants working at the Liaison Office in Latvia whose competence and efforts have been instrumental in all the results that have been achieved: Daina Biezaite, Iveta Grāvīte, Jānis Rungulis, Madara Antone and Laima Bauvare.

Ilze Doškina

## UNICEF – the United Nations Children’s Fund

“I speak for those children who cannot speak for themselves, children who have absolutely nothing but their courage and their smiles, their wits and their dreams.”

*Audrey Hepburn, UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador*

### Foundation and mission

The United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund was founded in 1946 immediately after World War II in order to help millions of children and families affected by the horrors and destruction of war to address urgent needs and ensure their survival. After 1950, the member states of the Fund decided to focus on specific programmes to promote child welfare, including health, availability of food and education, and protection of their rights, mostly in less-developed countries and countries in crisis. In 1953, the organisation was renamed UNICEF, and in 1965 it was awarded the Nobel Prize for its work in protecting children’s rights. Following a lengthy drafting process, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted in 1989. From that point forward, it became the cornerstone of all children’s rights policies throughout the world.

In 1992, shortly after restoring independence, Latvia became a member of the United Nations and became a party to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. At that time, active efforts were started to integrate the rights of the child into the national agenda and guarantee equal development opportunities to all children in Latvia. A decision was taken to establish a UNICEF National Committee in Latvia, which is the UNICEF format of operation in countries with relatively high income. At the time, there were 37 such UNICEF offices throughout the world, including in our neighbouring countries of Estonia and Lithuania. Work on creating the Committee already began in 1991, and the Charter of the UNICEF National Commission of Latvia was adopted by a decision of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia on 23 September 1992.

It tasked the National Committee with the following:

- To implement the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child of 20 November 1989 in Latvia.
- To keep the public up-to-date about the work of UNICEF and to promote the execution of its programmes.
- To submit to the parliament and government of the Republic of Latvia recommendations on any issue pertaining to the protection of children's rights in Latvia and to actively participate in the drafting and implementation of Latvia's national programme on the protection of the rights of the child.
- To provide information about children's rights violations in Latvia and abroad and the consequences thereof.
- To raise public awareness about problems in the protection of children's rights and bring these to the attention of the authorities.
- To develop and strengthen cooperation with UNICEF and other National Committees by taking part in the implementation of joint programmes and by studying issues of interest to the Republic of Latvia.
- Based on an analysis of the legal status of children, to protect children's rights in Latvia through collaboration with local governments, state and civic organisations, and private individuals, as well as any other institution with an interest in solving children's issues.
- To raise funds, sell UNICEF merchandise, and implement other measures in the framework of UNICEF programmes.
- To be an intermediary between UNICEF and ministries, departments, institutions, organisations and individuals responsible for protecting children's rights.
- To ensure that children's health, culture, education and mental development programmes become an integral part of national social and economic development.

Various politicians and public figures of the time, such as Ilmārs Geige, Andris Bērziņš, Imants Rākins, Arnolds Skride, Inguna Ebela, Maija Beķere, Anita Rektiņa and others, were actively involved in the creation of the UNICEF National Commission in Latvia in 1993; the organisation then became the UNICEF National Committee of Latvia, registered in the Enterprise Register under the status of an association. Shortly after the Committee was established, lawyer Anita Ušacka was appointed as its head in 1994; from that point on, she would focus mainly on children's rights in the national and international contexts, as well as on evaluating how the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was being implemented in Latvia. In 1996, nominated by the parliament of Latvia, Anita Ušacka was elected to the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Latvia, becoming one of the first of six justices of this court, and thus began my 11-year-long professional journey in UNICEF.

It was clear that this was not an organisation for charity, but rather one focused on the protection of rights and raising awareness about them. The first step was



understanding the whole realm of children’s rights, which covers a broad range of public partners and government bodies. As is often the case in our introverted society, one of the main issues was a lack of coordination, a fragmented system for the protection of children’s rights and a lack of communication among the various partners involved. Positive examples I would like to mention here are the partnerships with other UN agencies in Latvia, as well as non-governmental organisations and professional associations such as the Children’s Foundation of Latvia and the “Save the Children” organisation. This created a solid foundation for further work to guarantee the exercise of all the functions listed in the Committee’s Charter. The work of the National Committee was supervised and coordinated by the UNICEF Regional Office in Geneva, Switzerland.

There was little understanding of issues pertaining to children’s rights during Soviet rule and in the first years of independence; anything to do with children was still widely believed to be “a family matter” for which no intervention

beyond school or paediatric physicians was needed or wanted. Society was also perplexed by the title of the UN Convention, which refers only to the rights of the child, even though the document itself contains an equal balance of rights and obligations.

The first opportunity to work together with UNICEF colleagues to identify a list of homework and areas of focus came about in 1998 when we held the first International Conference on the Rights of the Child in Riga. Awareness was limited and many rows of seats were empty at the Journalists’ House at Mārstaļu iela in Riga, but what we did have was an abundance of confidence and determination. The guest list of the event featured many prominent European rights’ activists, including Polish lawyer Adam Łopatka, who had been personally involved in the drafting of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as many local journalists. Having managed to convince our colleagues at the Geneva office to finance this conference, the event was a success, and it gave us faith that by continuing to talk about these issues and advocate for them, we would be able to instil the UN principle that children are valuable in the public, common consciousness and legislation. This also helped strengthen contacts with colleagues at other UN agencies, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and others, as issues pertaining to children’s health, education, safety and the reduction of poverty are topical to all.

---

In 1992, shortly after restoring independence, Latvia became a member of the United Nations and became a party to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

---



Awarding Saldus Hospital with the title of “Baby-Friendly Hospital” in 2002. From the left: Ženija Livdāne, representative of the Latvian Society for Promoting Breast-Feeding, Aiga Rūrāne, representative of the World Health Organisation, Ilze Doškina, Executive Director of the UNICEF National Committee in Latvia, Agris Skujevskis, neurologist and Chair of the Board of Saldus Medical Centre, and Ainars Baštiks, Minister for Children and Family Affairs. Photo from personal archives

From my very first day in office, I established close cooperation with the “Protect the Children” organisation (“Save the Children” until 2014) and its chairperson Inguna Ebela, who was also a Member of the Board of UNICEF. Her experience and determination were phenomenal, and she was doing everything to help gain public attention: she had a television show, she organised marathons, campaigns to collect funding and support, and donation drives, and she opened a legal aid office for children and parents. Ms Ebela placed initial emphasis on the fact that in the context of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child it is crucial to listen to the opinions of NGOs and children themselves. “Protect the Children” also issued an alternative opinion about the status of children in Latvia, which was examined in Geneva in 2002. I had the honour of being present to express my views on the matter and answer questions.

At around the same time, I was approached by a group of Swedish UNICEF volunteers who had read the Latvian statistics on so-called “street children” and wanted to help improve the situation. The organisation had at its disposal goodwill, organisational skills and specialists, but they did not know how to actually reach the children. There were no statistics or definitions as to who these “street children” were. There was no time to lose, and then at a working group meeting at the Ministry of

Education and Science I happened to meet Zeltīte Loze, an inspector with the Public Order Police Department, and her colleagues, who worked with children in need on a daily basis.

In terms of children’s welfare, the late 1990s was a difficult time in Latvia: there was a lot of vagrancy, and glue-sniffing and robbery were a way of life for many children with various mental, social and health issues. With the help of Swedish volunteers and the involvement of specialists, we managed to set up a camp for children in need and suffering from addictions, some of whom were under the age of ten. We hosted these camps for five years. Personal interaction with these children also reinforced within me the conviction that there is really no such thing as “other people’s children” – children are Latvia’s next generation, and we are collectively responsible for shaping that generation into what we would like it to be. This greatly helped my colleagues and myself to see that by continuing to lobby for children’s rights at all levels, we can achieve real change, because there are people who care everywhere.

The day-to-day operations of the office were run by three people. Each person had their area of competence, but all together we were one team. Collaboration with other agencies, and later moving to the UN building on Pils iela in Old Riga,

opened the door to ever-closer cooperation. Back when online meetings were not yet a regular thing, experts and researchers would regularly come visit us in person.

UNICEF also issued various annual publications, including the State of the World’s Children report, which features statistics and situational analyses. This publication often served as a good reference for researchers and journalists writing analytical articles on topical issues, as there were not that many reliable resources available providing a global view and comparable statistics.

Together with UNICEF, we drafted and translated a manual for judges on how to perceive children’s rights without interpretation. Other accomplishments to mention included training judges, police officers, journalists and teachers.

The institutions working in our field were our direct cooperation partners. One of these was the State Inspectorate for Protection of Children’s Rights – a subordinate body of the Ministry of Education and Science, it is the main state authority overseeing the protection of children’s rights. The management of the State Inspectorate had an excellent understanding of the priorities, but comprehensive improvements were hindered by a fragmentation of the supervision and coordination of children’s rights issues among state and local government institutions. There were many good laws drafted and many hours spent in meetings with parliamentary committees, but results were slow to come.

---

Back when online meetings were not yet a regular thing, experts and researchers would regularly come visit us in person.

---

There were heated political debates about the idea of creating a separate ministry for the supervision of children's rights issues, which would serve as a catalyst for bringing order in this area. The ministry was established by a decision of parliament, and Ainars Baštiks was appointed Special Assignments Minister for Children and Family Affairs; he was a pastor, the father of a large family, and he had a clear vision of what needed to be done. His approach was family-oriented and simple: go slowly, step-by-step, listen to world-class experts, but take your own decisions based on legislative requirements and the actual situation.

I believe that the creation of this Ministry gave a breath of fresh air to the whole ecosystem of children's rights, but most importantly in regard to families with children. A lot of new legislation was passed, *inter alia* on maternity benefits and other benefits, as well as on various initiatives for large families, and many of these are still in force today. The Minister was genuinely interested, always open to cooperation, and knowledgeable. The collaboration between UNICEF and the Ministry for Children, Family Affairs and Social Integration blossomed into an excellent partnership, with experts from the UNICEF Regional Office visiting regularly.

Unfortunately, more and more additional functions kept being added to the Ministry's mandate, and several years later it was dissolved altogether, but many experts and competent specialists were transferred along with the functions they performed to other ministries and institutions.

The UNICEF National Committee was responsible for raising awareness in the areas of competence of UNICEF in Latvia; this included issues that may have seemed obvious or insufficiently explained to the public, such as a child's right to mother's milk, preventing iodine deficiency in the population, the mortality rates of children under the age of five, the prevention of HIV/AIDS, vaccination, education, etc. The UNICEF Regional Office was in charge of all of these issues, and it was our duty to regularly organise information campaigns and foster cooperation with state institutions and NGOs. In this regard, I absolutely have to mention my outstanding colleagues and partners who grasped the severity of the situation regarding HIV/AIDS, as well as the staff of the Health Promotion Centre, whose coordinated efforts helped mitigate risks for newborns and their mothers and who collected data on iodine deficiency in Latvia through extensive regional surveys funded by UNICEF.

## The Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative

The Breast-Feeding Promotion Committee, existing at the time under the Ministry of Welfare, is deserving of special mention here. It was tasked with ensuring that Latvia could join the global Baby-Friendly Hospital Network, through which from the very first day of their lives, babies are supplied with that which is

of paramount importance – mother's milk – and through which specialists are trained to be able to support new mothers immediately after delivery in the maternity ward.

The Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative aims to ensure that an increasing number of new mothers exclusively breast-feed their baby at least for the first six months and then continue nursing throughout the first year of their child's life and beyond, thus improving the child's health. The status of Baby-Friendly Hospital (BFH) is conferred to a hospital by a specially trained team of evaluators if the hospital fulfils the internationally set criteria dubbed the "10 steps". Hospitals are nominated for BFH status by a decision of the Committee for the Promotion of Breastfeeding of the Ministry of Health and the Public Health Agency. Features of a baby-friendly hospital include the following: mothers and babies are always together; breastfeeding is started immediately after delivery; and babies are fed exclusively with breast milk. When we launched this movement in 2000, we encountered a lot of scepticism and received many questions, but we remained steadfast, and moreover we stuck with the Estonian example, where the BFH initiative had already been introduced. The response was huge, and the network of maternity wards expanded rapidly, because, in obstetrics, service and quality go hand in hand. I clearly remember the first hospital to receive BFH status – it was the Maternity Ward of Kuldīga Hospital, and I can still picture the pride I saw in the eyes of the doctors, specialists and hospital management that day. Years later, having delivered my youngest daughter at the Riga Maternity Hospital, it was such a pleasure to witness the professional attitudes of all the nurses who explained everything in detail to myself and all other mothers there. Their approach was professional, practical and implemented as a matter of course. It was extremely gratifying to see this one step of the way done.

## United Nations Millennium Development Goals

As the turn of the century drew closer, the United Nations spent over two years preparing a special global session dedicated to children. It was planned to be held in September 2001, but it was rescheduled after the tragic terrorist attacks in the United States. The session was finally held in the spring of 2002 at the UN headquarters in New York. The Latvian delegation consisted of representatives from the public and non-governmental sector, as well as two youths who were selected through a special competition organised by the State Inspectorate for Protection of Children's Rights. The youths had their own programme, and work on drafting the resolution lasted late into the night. Those days in New York were unforgettable – thousands of youths with visions of how they wanted to shape the world. They did not have any undue excesses, but they had their vision and a desire to take action. The session

ended with the adoption of the World Fit for Children declaration listing the 10 fundamental points that are crucial for children's survival and quality of life. These elements were nothing new, yet their compilation into a single document with all member states in agreement and with the participation of children themselves to highlight their needs was a turning point in the work of the organisation.

In 2000, world leaders from 191 countries signed the United Nations Millennium Declaration, which refers to the commitment to achieve eight Millennium Development Goals by 2015. These related to various issues regarding improving quality of life in such areas as education, health, environmental sustainability and others. The implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), especially in regard to promoting development cooperation, has also been established as a priority of the European Union. From the children's rights protection perspective, UNICEF pays special attention to the reduction of poverty, guaranteeing basic education to all, reducing child and maternal mortality, and limiting and preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases.

As I mentioned previously, in my daily work I cooperated closely with other UN agencies in Latvia; we worked towards common goals based on the same guidelines and roadmaps. Here, I must mention the UN building in Old Riga, where the majority of United Nations agencies operating in Latvia were housed. It was important that we were all under one roof, because we were essentially all working on the same thing. This was a place where employees, partners and the general public could work, plan, celebrate and come together. It was easy to find, in the very heart of Old Riga. Our home. With a hint of history, but modernly equipped, it was a place where centuries intersected and ideas for the future were born. And my co-workers are an ever-lasting treasure – we still meet up as old friends and brothers-in-arms.

## Education for all

For many years, ensuring access to education has been a priority for the United Nations and its agencies. Education can be likened to a cornerstone for any society – it is the best thing a state can provide to its people. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates that “everyone has the right to education”, yet there are still huge numbers of children not going to school. Education is not only a right, it is the ticket to a developed society that opens the door to independence and opportunity.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has become somewhat of a guiding beacon in this process. Of course, words are the only weapons at the disposal of the UN bodies, and, if you didn't know any better, you may assume that all they do is talk about some topic or other, but in actuality it is essentially lobbying, reinforcing legislation, and urging countries to allocate more

funding for education. Together with the wonderful team of the UNESCO National Committee, led by Dace Melbārde, who served as Secretary-General at that time, we were an active lobby, pooling our resources to catch the attention of policy-makers. At the dawn of the 21st century, problems arising out of the closure of small rural schools had not yet become a major issue, and the birth rate had not yet tumbled into a demographic hole, but it was already clear that a change was in store for education. There were changes made to the system in the hopes of raising the quality of education in all schools and making education accessible to all, while following up on the children who had fallen out of the school system.

UNESCO mobilised its resources, and meetings with the highest officials of the Ministry of Education and Science were held regularly; moreover, we had combined our abilities and moved into the same office on the second floor of the building at Pils laukums 4. Putting our minds and abilities together, we made extensive plans, brainstormed and worked – we organised too many meetings, discussions and working groups to count. UNESCO schools, our volunteer movement, and direct interaction with the sector gave us confidence that we were moving in the right direction.

Looking back at that time today, it sometimes feels like nothing was actually achieved at all and problems are only becoming worse, but the problems are different now: low birth rates, the demographic crisis, and accessibility and quality of education.

For many years, the Ministry of Education and Science has been the main supervisory body for children's rights in Latvia. During my 11 years in office as the Executive Director of the UNICEF National Committee, 13 ministers of education came and went. Naturally, this does not facilitate continuity and ensuring the quality of education.

An interesting fact: in 2002, upon the invitation of Dace Melbārde, Secretary-General of the UNESCO National Committee, we went on a joint visit to Chisinau, Moldova to attend the "Education for All" summit. The trip was quite an epic one and we still remember it with a smile, for our layover airport was supposed to be Moscow, Russia, but our plane landed in... St. Petersburg. The adventure was basically a tragic comedy and slightly reminiscent of a popular Soviet film – in this case, the culprit was simply bad weather, but all in all the journey took us a whole day and night. When we finally did arrive in Chisinau, the capital of Moldova, and got to the meeting at the local UNDP office, the reality we encountered was harsh: money and budget are not a guarantee or measure of the quality of education. Real-life stories from teachers' experiences where remuneration and provisions were 10 times less than in our schools made it clear that our list of homework tasks was still a very long one. And it remains so to this day.

## UNICEF and funding

Unlike many other UN agencies, UNICEF partially finances its programmes through attracting funding and selling UNICEF postcards and souvenirs. To my knowledge, it is the only UN body that has ever become famous for its postcards. UNICEF's first greeting card was a drawing by 7-year-old Jitka Samkova, whose village in Czechoslovakia had received UNICEF emergency assistance in the form of food and medicine following World War II. The little girl sent in her drawing as a special thank you to UNICEF for its help in recovering from the devastation of war. This launched a huge thank-you card campaign; the postcards feature contemporary art, and all earnings go towards helping UNICEF save and protect the most vulnerable and impoverished children in the world.

The UNICEF National Committee in Latvia also performed this function. I remember the charming little blue box of UNICEF postcards that you could buy from time to time at news stands when I was a child; that little box was symbolic, elegant and meant to help. I never imagined that these postcards would one day become a part of my daily work and that I would have to come up with ways to promote this unique experience and attract funding.

The promotion and sale of these postcards was a function carried out by all UN National Committees, becoming especially prominent around the holiday season, because every postcard equalled a donation. Our partners and supporters included various companies that would exclusively purchase UNICEF cards to send to their partners to wish them season's greetings. Naturally, with such a small team, it was impossible to take care of marketing and sales, so, based on the experiences of other countries, we started developing a network of UNICEF volunteers. The community of school-aged youths in Latvia is amazing, active, willing to take action and explore the world, and the desire to do good and help out comes naturally to them. This allowed us to create an expansive school network across Latvia, and thanks to active teachers and motivated youths, UNICEF postcards reached even the farthest corners of the country. Schools in Madona, Gaujiena, and Liepāja were the most active, but so were Secondary School No. 13 of Riga and the Riga Hanza Secondary School. I hope that today these youths can look back and remember with a smile and positive memories the time when volunteer work in Latvia was still in its infancy. There were days when our office was overflowing with schoolchildren packaging, wrapping and sorting postcards. I am sincerely thankful to each and every one of them even after all these years! This facilitated awareness that the United Nations was not merely people in suits sitting in meetings or piles of documents, but rather real people, just like any one of us.

We were lucky to have excellent partners, because from my very first years at the UNICEF National Committee, we organised, in collaboration with Latvian





**UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador from Latvia Marija Naumova (right) and Ilze Doškina, Executive Director of the UNICEF National Committee in Latvia, signing a cooperation agreement. Photo: Mārtiņš Plūme (LETA)**

Television, the International Day of Children’s Broadcasting – a comprehensive affair created by UNICEF that compiled support for children’s rights, children’s voices and children’s interests into a full day of quality programming with films and discussions, which dovetailed with an evening concert at the Latvian Television studio. This was also an opportunity to invite our supporters and volunteers to take part in live broadcasts. I need to give a special mention for Aivars Auziņš, a director in the Children’s Broadcasting Department of Latvian Television, who had a talent for creating an unforgettable experience for any child at the studio and on-air.

UNICEF is also known for the Danny Kaye International Children’s Awards for young performers. Danny Kaye was not only a famous American actor and comedian, but also a Golden Globe and two-time Oscar winner, and the first UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador. To my knowledge, the only Latvian performer to ever have received the award is violinist Baiba Skride, who won it in 1992.

Through working together with and learning from UNICEF colleagues abroad, we found out about the UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador movement, which is represented by such world-renown artists as Audrey Hepburn, Roger Moore (best known for his portrayal of James Bond), Shakira, footballer David Beckham, Ricky Martin and others, and we came to the conclusion that Latvia needs one, too! It was clear

that we needed to extend this invitation to a public figure with an interest in our work and an understanding of global processes, and for us that person was singer Marija Naumova. Together, we accomplished so much: we managed to bring attention to children's rights issues and we provided support to specific children and their families. Marija was already known for her work in protecting children's rights, and she was also organising practical assistance for families in need, so in 2005 we signed a cooperation agreement appointing Marija Naumova as the first UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador in Latvia.

2005 was a productive year for us, as we also managed to secure a partnership with the "Ventspils" football club, which also resulted in the signing of a cooperation agreement and a campaign for bringing in funding. Football is a very democratic sport; therefore, it seemed like the right choice for attracting youths and other patrons of the sport. That is how UNICEF does it elsewhere around the world as well. We had ambitious plans to host a football game with world stars in cooperation with the International Football Federation (FIFA), but unfortunately that did not happen.

## Epilogue

Over the years, Latvia has implemented a multitude of reforms in various areas – it has joined the EU and NATO, it has become a donor country itself, and it provides support to others through development cooperation facilities. And it gives a sense of a job well-done to have been a part of these accomplishments. Even though the organisation is often criticised and the need for reforming it has been discussed for decades, for me UNICEF is first and foremost people – here in Latvia and throughout the world. It is every single one of our former volunteers, every staff member and board member. Everyone for whom children are a priority and a value.

UNICEF is continuing its work around the world to protect children's rights and realise the potential in every single child from their birth to their teenage years. And it never gives up.



# LATVIA AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

Mārtiņš Drēģeris

# The Role of the United Nations in International Security and Latvia's Security

The 17<sup>th</sup> of September 1991 is an important day in the history of Latvian diplomacy and international relations. On that day, Latvia was admitted into the United Nations along with the other Baltic States, South Korea, North Korea, Micronesia and the Marshal Islands. Since that time, radical change has taken place on every continent - politically, and also physically due to climate change. The relatively peaceful collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s opened the door for many European countries, Latvia included, to restore their sovereignty and independence. But at the same time, various ethnic, religious and armed conflicts intensified in many other areas such as the Western Balkans, Africa and the Middle East.

Since the end of the Cold War, the range of topical issues and problems on the UN agenda has also changed significantly: from postwar reconstruction and dismantling the colonial system to the introduction and strengthening of international standards of human rights, as well as climate change and sustainability issues. The UN is still the only organisation that may authorise the use of force in international relations.

## Can there be peace without the United Nations?

What would the world, intergovernmental and international relations, and diplomatic efforts look like if the UN and the Security Council did not exist?

One of the most important principles in modern-day international law is the prohibition on using force or the threat of force in international relations. The Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 outlawed use of force as an instrument of national policy in international relations. This prohibition has been enshrined in the Charter of the UN (Article 2.4) as a fundamental principle and is *ius cogens* (a peremptory norm) in international law. There are, however, two exceptions: the right of the UN Security Council to authorise use of force and the inherent (natural) rights of states to self-defence. The latter may be exercised by military means.

If there was no UN, would the world descend into chaos and anarchy? I think it would be safe to assume that for a certain period of time the international system would be in limbo, but the countries of the world would definitely eventually adapt to the new situation. There would be more self-organisation based on regionality. The Earth would, of course, still keep on turning.

But if Western democracies woke up one day to find that the United Nations had disappeared, the immediate reaction of many would certainly be shock and a sense that our world has become more of a jungle, where *homo homini lupus est* (man is a wolf to a man). Looking at it from a different angle, were you to ask someone from the Global South for their thoughts on the death of the UN, their answer would probably be something like this: “Dear me, the world we live in has been in a constant state of collapse for decades. That wave has finally reached the West. Welcome to our world!”

One might argue that the fact that for example Palestine and Kosovo still want to join the UN shows that the UN is not completely useless (and there is just as much pushback against this from, for example, Israel, the United States, Serbia and others). A second and even stronger argument is that, to this day, no country has ever withdrawn from the United Nations – no one has even talked about such a thing. The same cannot be said about the European Union, for example.

The paradox of the UN lies in the fact that its authority is only as strong as the strength of the collective goodwill of its Member States.

One of the main challenges for the UN relates to the expectations we as the human race place on it. The United Nations is generally considered to be the world's government. But it has never been that, nor will it ever be. The UN is frequently and extensively, sometimes justifiably, criticised for its ineffectiveness, but the majority of the blame for this lies not with the organisation as such, but rather its constituent, Member States.

## Why does the UN Security Council not ensure security?

In his address to the 78th Session of the UN General Assembly in New York on 20 September 2023, President of Latvia Edgars Rinkēvičs drew the world's attention to the need for meaningful reforms of the UN Security Council: “The United Nations is not a perfect institution. Inability to stop aggression or conflicts has often called this organization's effectiveness into doubt. Still, as the only truly global organization, it is the core of the multilateral system uniting all sovereign states. It is especially important for smaller countries, like my own country – Latvia. Revitalization of the UN system and meaningful reforms of the Security Council are necessary.

The inability of the Security Council caused by the abuse of the veto is a serious concern. That is why Latvia supports efforts to make the Security Council more transparent and accountable for its inaction. Veto power was not created as a privilege but as a responsibility.<sup>1</sup> The working mechanism of the UN Security Council needs to be brought in line with the reality of international relations, law and security policy in the 21st century.

One reason why some do not appreciate the work of the United Nation is that the principles it has created have become so taken for granted, that it seems they have always existed. Today, it is difficult to imagine that we would have to agree on the fact that it is impolite to conquer another country by force. That is simply a given!

At the same time, the UN has stood at a crossroad for some time, with an increasingly assertive China and Russia testing the UN's basic ideals regarding human rights and international law. For example, since 24 February 2022, when Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered his armed forces to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has been abusing the United Nations as a platform to further its own objectives, and it has used its veto rights on the Security Council to discredit and inhibit the organisation's work.

We might ask – why can't we unite together and put Russia in its place? The answer is obvious when we look at the world map and its history. Even though the war against Ukraine has and will continue to have an impact on our own security in Europe and the wider region, it is essentially limited to a very small part of the world. Moreover, we should keep in mind that some Latin American and African countries, as well as India, still hold a certain sentimentality for Russia as the successor of the Soviet Union, which had very close economic and military ties with these regions from the 1950s to 1980s. Therefore, we cannot really blame countries in Africa or South America, for example, for not taking a genuine interest in a conflict happening on the other side of the world. How interested are the people of Latvia in the civil conflict in Columbia or forced child labour in the cobalt mines of the Democratic Republic of Congo? Not very. These things happen far away. Thus, one of the duties of Latvian diplomats is to talk with representatives of all states at the UN about the war against Ukraine, raising awareness about the consequences for the security architecture not only in Europe, but also elsewhere.

The war against Ukraine is not just a European problem, as clearly evidenced by the matter of global food security. From the very outset, the war has exacerbated the global food crisis, and food prices have risen around the world. Ukraine is the world's largest exporter of sunflower oil (50% of global exports), the third largest exporter of barley (18%), the fourth largest exporter of corn (16%), and the fifth largest

---

<sup>1</sup> Chancery of the President of Latvia, Statement by Edgars Rinkēvičs, President of the Republic of Latvia, at the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly, <https://www.president.lv/en/article/statement-edgars-rinkevics-president-republic-latvia-78th-session-united-nations-general-assembly>



President of Latvia Edgars Rinkēvičs giving his statement at the UN Security Council High-Level Open Debate in New York on 20 September 2023. Sitting behind the President: Sanita Pavļuta-Deslandes, Permanent Representative of Latvia to the UN, and Mārtiņš Drēgeris, Communication Adviser to the President of Latvia. Photo: Ilmārs Znotiņš, Chancery of the President of Latvia

exporter of wheat (12%). Exports from Ukraine, especially wheat, are of great importance for certain countries in Asia and Africa. For example, in the period from 2016 to 2021, countries in these regions received 92% of Ukraine's wheat.<sup>2</sup> Before the war, about 90% of Ukraine's agricultural products were exported by sea. Once the war started, Russian forces blocked Ukraine's ports in the Black Sea, thus effectively stopping all exports. As a result, millions of people around the world, especially in Africa, were in danger of famine. That is why in his statement at the UN Security Council High-Level Open Debate in New York on 20 September 2023, President of Latvia Edgars Rinkēvičs expressed the following position: "Russia's war against Ukraine is causing serious geopolitical, economic, and humanitarian consequences far beyond Europe's borders. It is Russia's war against Ukraine that has aggravated the shortage of food supplies, not the sanctions. Russia considers food as a weapon of war rather than an essential humanitarian good to prevent hunger around the globe.

<sup>2</sup> European Council, Council of the European Union, "How the Russian invasion of Ukraine has further aggravated the global food crisis", <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/how-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-has-further-aggravated-the-global-food-crisis/>

Russia alone is responsible for stopping the Black Sea Grain Initiative. This initiative allowed millions of tonnes of foodstuffs to be exported to global markets and feed those in need.”<sup>3</sup>

Even though it is currently impossible to strip a permanent member of the UN Security Council of its veto rights, Latvia’s foreign policy in this area mostly envisions the introduction of initiatives that would restrict the use of a veto in cases of genocide, as well as crimes of war and aggression. Latvia is also working on UN reforms in the framework of a cross-regional group of like-minded countries – the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency Group – and it voices its opinion at intergovernmental negotiations on the reform of the UN Security Council. The objective of these diplomatic efforts is to ensure equal representation for all regions on the UN Security Council, which includes increasing the representation of Eastern Europe, Africa, Latin America and small island states.

## **The UN’s practical contributions to strengthen Latvia’s security**

Since joining the United Nations, Latvia has been actively working in the First Committee of the UN General Assembly, which deals with disarmament and international security issues. This committee works on matters that many take completely for granted (read: that are taken for granted in the West, but not globally). For example, in the West it is a given and generally accepted fact that chemical and biological weapons are not used even in political rhetoric, and nuclear weapons are not a viable means to destroy your adversaries. Yet such rules are not carved in stone. They change. For instance, a topical issue today is cyber security, which is a relatively new challenge.

Upon joining the United Nations, Latvian diplomats had their work cut out for them advocating for Latvia’s interests from the UN rostrum. This was particularly important with regard to the withdrawal of the armed forces of the Russian Federation from the territory of the Baltic States. There were still around 50,000 military personnel of the Russian Federation located in Latvia as a remnant of the Soviet occupation. Although this issue was mostly dealt with bilaterally and with the assistance of Latvia’s allies, the United Nations and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe became the key platforms where Latvia could remind the world about the illegal presence of foreign armed forces in its territory, thus placing pressure on Russia to withdraw these forces as soon as possible. On the initiative of

---

<sup>3</sup> Chancery of the President of Latvia, “Statement by President Rinkēvičs at the UN Security Council High-Level Open Debate”, <https://www.president.lv/en/article/statement-president-rinkevics-un-security-council-high-level-open-debate>



the Baltic States, the General Assembly of the UN adopted two resolutions (in 1992 and 1993) on the complete withdrawal of Russian armed forces.<sup>4</sup> Would this have happened without UN involvement? Probably, yes. But importantly, working with colleagues from all continents allowed us to significantly raise their awareness about the occupation of Latvia and other states. And that awareness remains crucial today as well.

Another important area that Latvian diplomats needed to focus on at the UN was Russia's efforts to maliciously refer to human rights violations, thus sowing doubt about the ability of the Baltic States to guarantee security within their own territory. Russian representatives at the UN claimed that Latvia and Estonia were allowing discrimination to persist, and that they should not be allowed to only restore citizenship to those who had been citizens on the day of their occupation in 1940 and their descendants. In this way, Russia tried to call into question the doctrine of continuity, which was the foundation for the restoration of the independence of the Baltic States, thus attempting to dispute the legitimacy of the Baltic States as such. Despite Russia's extensive efforts to have the UN condemn the "massive human right violations" taking place in the Baltic States, this never came to fruition. Quite the opposite: the 1992 resolution welcomed the cooperation that the government of Latvia had extended to the United Nations, and in 1996 the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly, which deals with human rights issues, decided to discontinue the monitoring of the human rights situation in Latvia and Estonia.<sup>5</sup>

Not only can Latvia build its security from within the UN, but it can also support like-minded countries. And that is often the same thing. Peace in Latvia can be stable only if there is peace throughout Europe and our whole region. In 2018, Latvia was able to support Moldova by backing the UN General Assembly resolution on the "Complete and unconditional withdrawal of foreign military forces from the territory of the Republic of Moldova", which was reminiscent of our own experience

---

Not only can Latvia build its security from within the UN, but it can also support like-minded countries. And that is often the same thing. Peace in Latvia can be stable only if there is peace throughout Europe and our whole region.

---

---

<sup>4</sup> Jānis Mažeiks, "Latvia within International Human Rights Organisations", *A Century of Latvian Diplomacy. The First Hundred Years of Latvia's Diplomacy and Its Foreign Service (1919–2019) as Reflected in Essays by Diplomats*, compiled and edited by Mārtiņš Drēģeris. Riga: Zvaigzne ABC, 2021, p. 282

<sup>5</sup> For more information, see Kristīne Līce, Elīna Luīze Vitola, "Cilvēktiesības Latvijas ārpolitikā", *Jurista Vārds*, 05 November 2019, No. 44 (1102), p. 21–27, <https://juristavards.lv/doc/275546-cilvektiesibas-latvijas-arpolitika/>.



Meeting of the presidents of the Baltic States with UN Secretary-General António Guterres during the UN General Assembly in New York on 18 September 2023. From left: Gitanas Nausėda, President of the Republic of Lithuania, Edgars Rinkēvičs, President of the Republic of Latvia, Alar Karis, President of the Republic of Estonia, and António Guterres. Photo: Ilmārs Znotiņš, Chancery of the President of Latvia

with the withdrawal of Russian forces in 1994. Russia tried to stop this issue from being examined, but its proposal was voted down. Latvia was actively involved in the drafting and lobbying of this resolution.

We can only guess what will be discussed or what role, if any, the United Nations will play in 2050. In the world of 2024 the key issues raised at thematic discussions on regional security within the UN are Russia's war against Ukraine, the crisis in the Middle East, and the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Russian Federation takes every opportunity to criticise the United States and NATO, *inter alia* about the placement of military forces and activity along the borders of the Russian Federation; it also claims the decision of Sweden and Finland to join NATO is the death blow to the system established by the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). In turn, the United States condemns the Russian Federation for its attempts to undermine the whole architecture of international disarmament and arms control.

Ever since 2014, when the Russian Federation occupied the Ukrainian territory of Crimea, supporting Ukraine and reinforcing a rules-based international order has been a key priority for Latvia within the UN and other international organisations. By working with like-minded partners to draft relevant initiatives, Latvia

is continuing to maintain international pressure on Russia and Belarus by isolating them within the UN system wherever possible and by keeping the issue of Russia's accountability on the agenda. Despite the aggressor state increasingly trying to reinforce and justify its objectives by way of its membership to the bodies of international organisations, in recent years Russia has lost several of its long-held seats within elected bodies of the UN. In part that is thanks to the efforts of Latvia and like-minded states.

Latvia regularly voices its opinion at the UN Security Council and the General Assembly in New York, and the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, through national statements or joint statements of the Baltic States on any issue examined by these bodies pertaining to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, as well as through consistent participation in the lobbying of initiatives (resolutions).

In close collaboration with like-minded states, Latvia has been a leading country in ensuring the broadest possible support for all six General Assembly resolutions so far adopted condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine and for the initiatives of the Human Rights Council regarding the egregious human rights violations perpetrated by Russia in Ukraine.

## UN peace-keeping missions

The most frequent criticism of the role of the United Nations in international politics relates to its failed peace-keeping operations, the non-responsiveness or the ineffectuality of the Security Council, and its lack of decisive action in case of crisis or conflict. One would be hard-pressed to name any war or conflict around the world where the UN has used its authority to get involved and has succeeded in resolving it. Meanwhile, there is a long list of wars and conflicts in every region of the world that the UN has not only failed to prevent, but where it has also not been at the top of its game during the post-conflict phase. Just one such example is the Srebrenica massacre in 1995 during the Bosnian War. The UN peace-keeping missions generally considered to have been successful include those in Côte d'Ivoire (2004–2017), Liberia (2003–2018), and previously also in Cambodia (1992–1993) and East Timor (2006–2012). The UN Security Council's involvement in the peace process in Columbia in 2016 is also viewed as a positive contribution.

In 2016 Latvia began participating for the first time, in UN peace-keeping missions and operations. In the period from 2016 to 2022, Latvia took part in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). In total, Latvia participated in MINUSMA with nine service members. Due to the complicated security conditions, this was one of the most dangerous UN peace-keeping missions. Having failed to complete its tasks, the government of Mali requested the withdrawal of UN peace-keeping forces, resulting in the Security Council adopting a

decision in 2023 to terminate MINUSMA after 10 years of operation. This was obviously a failure, but it cannot be said it was a useless endeavour.

In April 2022, the parliament of Latvia supported Latvia's participation in the United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO), and in May 2022, Latvia joined the UNTSO mission in Jerusalem by dispatching one officer. In turn, in 2023, Latvia joined the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), which is currently of special importance due to the tensions in the region. Initially, Latvia sent three officers to the mission, with the contingent scheduled to gradually increase by also deploying an infantry platoon of about 30 service members. In parallel, Latvia is also continuing to participate in the UNTSO mission in Jerusalem. In addition to its practical participation in UN peace-keeping activities, Latvia has engaged in discussions about strengthening the UN peace-keeping process.

---

The paradox of the UN lies in the fact that its authority is only as strong as the strength of the collective goodwill of its Member States.

---

In 2022, Latvia was elected to participate in the work of the UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) for one year. Alongside addressing the usual factors which strengthen a state's ability to overcome post-conflict challenges – e.g., free elections, human rights and promoting good governance – an important topic in PBC discussions is ensuring accountability for past crimes. This is especially important in discussing the situation in Columbia, Gambia, and East Timor, i.e., states whose peace-building efforts have had relative

success. In international discussions, Latvia regularly highlights the importance of accountability, thus linking this issue with a broader conversation within the UN about accountability, particularly as it relates to Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

While military conflicts on other continents may indeed initially seem inconsequential for us, these events have something in common. The loss of democracy and its subsequent restoration is basically the same regardless of the location, climate or race.

## To conclude

Despite grounded criticism of the United Nations, it is the world's only global platform for international law and the rule of law consisting of 193 Member States. As it stands, there is no viable alternative for the UN system. Despite the numerous global hot spots and lack of faith in its ability to ensure the peaceful resolution of interstate conflicts, it is crucial to restore the international rule of law in a comprehensive way, to ensure effective multilateralism, to improve the functioning of

international organisations, and to build mutual trust among UN Member States. Is there an alternative? Yes. The total devaluation of international law, the collapse of the global security architecture, and essentially a free-for-all for the superpowers. Is it in Latvia's interests? No. Therefore, as a small state, it is existentially important for Latvia to defend a rules-based and law-based international system that guarantees global security, stability and adherence to international law.

Latvia's foreign policy is based on multilateral cooperation. And that is the essence of the United Nations. Consequently, Latvia's focus within the UN is on defending human rights and the international rule of law, and it has set the ambitious goal of gaining a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for the 2026–2027 term. This would not only contribute to Latvia's national and international security, but it would also be a hitherto unprecedented opportunity for Latvia to be part of the decision-making process on peace and security issues.

Katrīna Kaktiņa

# Arms control, the United Nations, and Latvia

## Introduction

Has arms control collapsed globally and specifically in Europe? This is the question I have encountered most frequently ever since 24 February 2022. My short answer is: “No”. Just because one state breaches its international commitments and fails to fulfil its obligations under international treaties in no way means that all of these treaties and obligations immediately become null and void. It is Latvia’s duty to remind about this to those asking. It is precisely because there are countries that are violating their international obligations that Latvia must be ever more adamant in its defence of the international rules-based order.

The overarching objective of arms control is stability. Thus, arms control as a whole does not collapse due to violations by one (or several) states. When stability is undermined in one location, it needs to be increasingly protected elsewhere to prevent the threat of instability from spreading.

Arms control, along with disarmament and non-proliferation, is a security strategy. It consists of a wide range of instruments designed to prevent armed conflicts or the escalation thereof and to guarantee stability. This can take the form of bilateral or multilateral treaties at a regional or global level, comprising unilateral or bilateral, mutually complementary measures.

As is the case with any international treaty – or, essentially, any agreement – arms control will succeed if the parties involved share a common goal. That is the main aim in any treaty negotiations: to identify the other party’s underlying interests and objectives, which that other party may understandably not be willing to reveal. If there is not even the slightest point of intersection in the national interests of the parties, then it will be nearly impossible to arrive at an acceptable and feasible agreement. The keywords here being “acceptable and feasible”, because there have been plenty of cases where states have agreed to certain terms that they have at no point had any intention of abiding by, neither in letter nor spirit (especially the latter). Thus, even though it may seem that an agreement is possible just because the parties are willing to conclude it, it will not be sustainable unless the parties are genuinely committed to fulfilling it.

## The faces of arms control

Arms control extends beyond the simple fact that everyone who has committed to an arms control treaty indeed fulfils those commitments in good faith and to their full extent. On the one hand, you would think that for arms control to work as a preventive measure against armed conflict, arms control mechanisms would need to have as wide a range of parties as possible, and all of these parties would need to fully abide by the rules of said mechanisms. But I will venture to assume that attaining that will never be possible.

One of the objectives of arms control is to identify when a party is failing to meet its obligations or there is a reason to suspect it. This objective is implemented by one element of arms control, that being verification. This is done not only directly by deterring parties from engaging in arms races and by verifying that the data on arms provided by each party is truthful, but also indirectly: if verification is impeded or denied, this is also grounds for the other party to draw conclusions on the state of affairs and to take relevant decisions on how to react. The international organisations and specialised agencies within the United Nations involved in arms control verification are the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO).

Maintenance of the role of international organisations is in Latvia's interests, because as a Member State of these organisations we can keep a close watch on developments and be part of the decision-making process. With Russia having withdrawn from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) and the Treaty on Open Skies, as well as it having revoked its ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), the remaining parties to the treaties have been able to verify its trustworthiness. The ability to draw such conclusions is one of the primary objectives of arms control. Case in point: in 2021, based on the Vienna Document procedures proposed by the Baltic States and Ukraine, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) ascertained that Russia and Belarus were essentially no longer fulfilling the arms control treaties. Thus, the other parties to the arms control mechanism were able to conclude that these two parties could no longer be trusted, and they adjusted their behaviour and reactions accordingly.

When in 2021 and early 2022 the Baltic States and Ukraine triggered the OSCE Vienna Document procedures against Belarus and Russia, demanding explanations for the movement of their armed forces and the concentration thereof along the Ukrainian border, some asked "what's the use?" Did anyone expect truthful answers from Russia and Belarus? For some, the answer to this question would be a resounding "no". But was there an option to not engage the Vienna Documents? Were these rules no longer binding to us? What would happen if we stood idly by and did not

employ any of the tools at our disposal? What would happen if we didn't say anything? These are the counter-questions I present when asked about the use of any diplomatic instrument, including addresses at international organisations in situations where the escalation of a confrontation is inevitable. Many dislike the typical diplomatic expressions of "expressing concern" and "expressing grave concern", but what would happen if we said nothing at all? If we were to remain silent in the face of impending or direct threats? If we were to remain silent when a full-scale war had already started? The same goes for arms control mechanisms. Even if a state's

---

If there is not even the slightest point of intersection in the national interests of the parties, then it will be nearly impossible to arrive at an acceptable and feasible agreement. Russia has realised that it is currently not the one to choose which tables it will sit at and which negotiations it will be a part of.

---

true objectives underlying its failure to abide by arms control rules are immediately clear at a single glance, we still have to ask these questions to that state. That is how we demonstrate that these mechanisms are still valid, that we take them seriously, and that we remain steadfast in upholding them.

As we found (yet again?) in 2022, after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, no international organisation or treaty will stop an attack by a country that is strictly determined to do so. Any arms control mechanism can merely prevent conflicts arising out of coincidence, by accident or due to isolated incidents. But, as mentioned previously, arms control mechanisms allow us to predict how a state will behave, to prepare for that behaviour, and to respond to it.

Arms control is also important during an armed conflict that no one has been able to prevent. I use the term "no one" because often enough one international organisation or another will bear the blame for not having been able to avert an armed conflict, but make no mistake: if an armed conflict has broken out, that means the no one and nothing could have prevented it. International treaties, including arms control treaties, remain in force during armed conflicts with the aim of, for example, protecting civilians from the use of wide range weapons or weapons of mass destruction.

The multi-faceted nature of arms control also arises from how difficult it is to update international treaties at the same pace as weapons are developed. Even though it is believed that technological development should be part of international law on arms control, and the specific nature of arms control could justify this, it is perhaps much more important to agree on certain rules of conduct that all countries undertake to abide by rather than list all possible types of weaponry and engage in the meticulous regulation thereof. An example of this is the discussions taking place in



Geneva on security in outer space. The drafting of a definition of “weapon” presents difficulty – in space, anything can be weaponized, even things that are designed for peaceful purposes, as long as they are purposefully used in an attack. That is why it is emphasised that existing international law as a whole, the UN Charter, and international humanitarian law are also applicable to outer space, and states are subject to principles of behaviour in space.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the multifaceted objectives of arms control are achieved in all phases of arms control, even when sceptics are already quick to pronounce the death of arms control mechanisms.

Even if an arms control mechanism is undermined, there is still a forum for discussing it and deciding on subsequent action. Latvia is currently a full-fledged member in negotiations on arms control mechanisms that were established at a time when Latvia had been stripped of its voice and ability to partake in their development. But, today, for more than 30 years already, we have been able to shape and uphold international norms and arms control in line with our own interests and those of like-minded countries, especially in light of being aware that in certain cases negotiations will take place without Latvia being present, between other parties who will have to regulate arms control issues amongst themselves.

## Multilateralism

Latvia has always been guided by a genuine desire to be a full-fledged member of multilateral mechanisms, where every member state has an equal vote. This may seem obvious, but especially in recent years – as support for Russia’s positions has started to dwindle within this system, it has begun to demand that the results of votes in the United Nations be viewed with consideration for the amount of the world’s population standing behind the vote. It is clear that Russia is grasping at straws here. Luckily for us, that is not the way that multilateralism works. And it is our duty and goal to remind everyone of this fact. That is precisely why multilateralism is crucial for small states, which must also be aware that everyone, not just us, will try to use it in their favour. At the same time, there are countries that have no desire whatsoever to participate in arms control negotiations in large-scale multilateral formats, being aware that their position will place them in the minority and they will not be able to secure enough support from like-minded states – therefore, they prefer smaller or regional formats where they are more likely to obtain favourable

---

<sup>1</sup> The International Institute for Strategic Studies, Interview with Ambassador Aidan Liddle, Permanent Representative of the UK to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva: “The Arms Control Poseur. Rules and norms for outer-space behaviour,” accessed on 05.08.2024, <https://youtu.be/-sT-62WbN6nw?si=uT2U0F1Y3lsecFo>.

outcomes. In certain cases, arrangements made between a couple of states in smaller formats can have a positive effect on the security interests of a broader group of countries.

However, the choice of negotiation partners is not a decision to be taken unilaterally. When it became evident in late 2021 that a Russian attack on Ukraine was imminent, attempts were made to negotiate with Russia via various channels. Russia did not wish to participate in the Renewed OSCE European Security Dialogue, and it was likewise derisive towards attempts by the European Union to involve it in negotiations. In a sweeping and proud gesture, Russia announced that it would only talk with the United States and NATO, but these potential negotiators did not accept Russia's ultimatum. When the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine began, the role of the EU in the area of security rapidly increased, and Russia soon realised that it would eventually have to come to the negotiating table at the OSCE, so it quickly dropped its scornful narrative of the organisation. I would assume that Russia is aware that, when it comes to security issues in multilateral formats, it has lost its image as a potential reliable intermediary – an honest broker – for quite a long time to come. Russia has realised that it is currently not the one to choose which tables it will sit at and which negotiations it will be a part of, but that does not mean that it has started to be constructive within the multilateral organisations that it is still a member of. While Russia still occasionally manages to rally at least some friends in the UN with a similarly destructive mindset, the group is usually too small to gain an advantage in votes, and so Russia will happily use its veto and any other blocking rights wherever possible. One method used by Russia is to block any joint statement, meeting summary, or even press release by an international organisation that would contain a truth inconvenient for Russia – this has been the case at the International Atomic Energy Agency, the review conference meetings of the Wassenaar Arrangement, the Hague Code of Conduct Against Ballistic Missile Proliferation (HCoC), and the Preparatory Meetings for the Review Conference of the Parties of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

## **Arms control and the United Nations**

Arms control is often viewed together with disarmament and non-proliferation, especially in regard to the role of the UN on all three blocs of issues. In the UN system, these three major blocs of issues span from New York to Geneva, from Vienna throughout the main UN bodies, as well as in the aforementioned other organisations and formats within the UN system.

Of these, the UN Security Council is the highest institution in the UN system that can respond to violations of arms control rules. The UN Security Council



Meeting of the CTBTO on 24 June 2024. Photo from personal archives

adopts decisions on enforcement pursuant to Chapter VII of the UN Charter on international peace and security. For example, the UN Security Council has reacted to violations of the NPT by Iran, North Korea, Syria and Libya, as well as to the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Meanwhile, discussions are ongoing about the effectiveness of the UN Security Council. This essay will not examine the effectiveness of the UN Security Council, but it must be noted that, first of all, the Security Council is not the only international organisation whose effectiveness has been called into question, and secondly, I believe that when one international organisation is unable to adequately respond to security challenges, it is appropriate and acceptable for other international organisations, which have more feasible tools at their disposal for that specific situation, to step up. It is my opinion that this is precisely the reason we have established various global and regional organisations – to carry the torch for a rules-based international order when someone else falls short for one reason or another. There is always more than one forum for the parties involved to meet in. Such meetings and the resolution of issues through international organisations is in Latvia's interests as it gives us the opportunity to have a voice that's equal to anyone else's.

For Latvia, the most important of the arms control and non-proliferation treaties that have been drafted under the auspices of the UN is the NPT. From Latvia's perspective, this comprehensive agreement – which has been joined by 191 states, including five nuclear countries, and which consists of three pillars (disarmament,

non-proliferation and the peaceful use of nuclear energy) – plays a central role ensuring gradual and reasonable nuclear disarmament whilst maintaining a strategic balance in the world.

Cases pertaining to arms control treaties are examined by the International Court of Justice. In this context, I have to mention the Advisory Opinion issued by the International Court of Justice in 1996<sup>2</sup> in regard to the NPT, which states *inter alia* that the use of nuclear weapons or a general threat thereof is inconsistent with international law applicable in armed conflict, particularly international humanitarian law, and that all states possessing nuclear weapons must conclude negotiations on all aspects of nuclear disarmament.

## Gender equality and arms control

An issue that Latvia places special focus on is the inclusion of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) concept and related concepts, e.g., gender equality, human security and human rights in a broader perspective, into arms control negotiations. This entails, on the one hand, special consideration of these issues within the content of arms control documents and negotiations, and on the other hand, striving for the

---

It is a well-known fact that, statistically, peace treaties where women have been involved in the drafting have resulted in a much more sustainable peace.

---

comprehensive and equal participation of women in arms control negotiations in general, in all phases and at all levels. Statistics compiled by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Studies (UNIDIR) show that in 2022 only 34% of the diplomats accredited to arms control and disarmament fora were women.<sup>3</sup>

One way that we can ensure women's participation in arms control fora is by committing to not taking part in panel discussions where gender parity has not been observed. This commitment has been embraced by all the ambassadors who are part of the International Gender Champions (IGC) network at the UN offices in New York, Geneva, Vienna, Nairobi, the Hague and Paris. So far, the Latvian ambassadors to the UN in Geneva and Vienna have joined this network. Membership in the IGC also means making a commitment to ensuring gender parity at events that we ourselves host or co-host. The ambassadors of some countries will

---

<sup>2</sup> International Court of Justice, "Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons, Advisory Opinion of 8 July 1996," accessed on 05.08.2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/95/095-19960708-ADV-01-00-EN.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, "UNIDIR Gender and Disarmament Hub," Accessed on 05.08.2024, <https://unidir.org/tools/gender-disarmament-hub/>.

actually instruct their capital that delegations not observing gender parity will not even be considered for registration.

Moreover, Latvia is also a founding member of both the Group of Friends on Gender Parity at the UN in New York and the Group of Friends on Gender Equality at the UN in Vienna. In collaboration with other members, these groups aim to ensure not only parity within the formats of the UN but also that UN resolutions are worded in a manner that promotes gender equality. Gender equality is not just a *pro forma* of how many women are on a national delegation, it is much more about the actual content: are women part of the decision-making process, do they have the opportunity to express themselves, are they sitting at the table behind Latvia's name plate, do they have real opportunities to voice their opinion, and is this opinion taken into consideration? And in the end, it is about whether policy change enacted by international organisations and every new international document is moving us forward towards our gender equality targets.

The active involvement of women in the decision-making process does not automatically translate into one position or another on arms control and other security policy issues. But it is a well-known fact that, statistically, peace treaties where women have been involved in the drafting have resulted in a much more sustainable peace.<sup>4</sup>

As with any issue at international organisations, when it comes to gender equality, our task is to at least maintain the rights we have achieved, because resistance and pressure to regress several decades back persists, albeit from only a handful of states. For gender equality, this sometimes means abandoning language that would throw us back into the previous century and instead waiting for the next window of opportunity to move forward. We must not and cannot afford to fall back.



**The author of the essay presenting a report at the CTBTO on behalf of the NB8 (Baltic and Nordic States).** Photo from personal archives

<sup>4</sup> UN WOMEN, "Preventing Conflict. Transforming Justice. Securing the Peace. A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325," accessed on 05.08.2024, [https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/globalstudy-wps\\_en\\_web.pdf](https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/globalstudy-wps_en_web.pdf).

## Windows of opportunity

There are windows in history that are more or less favourable for elaborating arms control rules, and it is crucial to be able to identify the moment when treaties concluded have the best chance of succeeding, being aware that these moments may not come around all that often. It is in the interests of Latvia and other like-minded countries that agreements and rules be elaborated in an atmosphere of mutual trust, or at least one with a reasonable level of trust such that they will be respected by all the parties involved. These windows of opportunity can open up suddenly, and we have to be ready. Meaning, we have to constantly be aware of our interests and objectives, and these must also be formulated by the other parties involved as we await a window of opportunity to open up. Latvia does so consistently, strategically and in a very coordinated manner.

As with any agreement, if there is a genuine desire to do so, then an agreement can be reached over anything and in a very short time; that genuine desire is also required in the subsequent execution of the agreement. If there is no such desire, then the process of reaching an agreement can drag on for years, possibly to never yield any result whatsoever. Moreover, success in concluding an agreement does not just depend on the professionalism of the diplomats involved. Yes, individual personalities play a role, but more important is the mosaic pieced together from the personalities of that specific time and place in combination with the personalities shaping politics in the capitals of each country. Thus, good windows of opportunity are impossible to forecast very far into the future, because they are determined by many pieces of the mosaic. For instance, in 2024, with dozens of elections taking place around the world, it is impossible to predict what the decision-maker mosaic will look like in 2025, what partnerships there will be, how previously established ones will interact, and how possible or impossible it will be to arrive at a consensus, or at least strategic decisions, on the future of arms control. For example, since early 2021, in light of the rhetoric used by Russia in international organisations, a tectonic shift could already be felt in Russia's attitude towards Ukraine. With the ZAPAD exercise in April 2021, following which forces were never withdrawn from the Ukrainian border but actually increased, these shifts became progressively more pronounced, and by the end of 2021 they were quite obvious. But could anyone have predicted that just a year from then we would be talking about the possible collapse of arms control as such, or about when and how it should be shaped in future? Would the reactions and decisions taken by the international community in 2022 in response to Russia's war have been the same if different personalities and political forces were in power? I don't think so.

Therefore, a strategic vision and strategic partnerships are crucial for Latvia, so that we may be ready for the next window of opportunity and so that we may sit in the front row among decision-makers when the time for making these decisions comes.

Since the restoration of independence, Latvia has been involved in the drafting of documents regarding all arms control mechanisms and the related areas of disarmament and non-proliferation, which are important and topical for us. Latvia has also taken on responsibility and been an intermediary by chairing these formats at various levels and serving in other elected positions. Latvia has been on the board of the International Atomic Energy Agency, it has presided over the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NGS), and it has been actively involved in the drafting of international treaties, such as the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), and the review conferences of such treaties.

Latvia carefully weighs the practical applicability of any new multilateral treaty and its added value in light of the existing mechanisms that Latvia has already joined. We do not rush to support every new idea just because its title may have a nice ring to it; we maintain a pragmatic and realistic approach, taking into consideration legal, practical and political benefits.

## **To conclude: Do we need to rebuild arms control?**

First of all, the arms control system in place thus far has been based on a set of principles that have not changed, become outdated or obsolete. That is the main thing to keep in mind when looking at whether we need to change existing arms control mechanisms or whether we primarily need to bring those who have strayed from their obligations back in line.

Secondly, should we conclude that arms control does indeed require updating or supplementing, then as long as at least one aggressor is sitting at the table within international organisations today, other states would not be that eager to launch into such discussions.

As with any strategic issue on the agenda of international organisations where the aggressor and its supporters are present, ideas first need to be formulated in the capitals, then, in collaboration with our closest allies, the dust may need to be brushed off of coalitions that have laid dormant for some time, and finally we have to be ready for a broader discussion when the time comes.

The phrase that something is “more important than ever before” is heard in international fora all too often in regard to various topics, including security and arms control. Yes, arms control is not only crucial for the prevention of armed conflict – it is just as crucial when an armed conflict has already broken out. However, I would dare to disagree that we are living in a time where international agreements and their prudent execution is more important than ever before. It has always been important. And it has always been important for Latvia. I would rather say that we are living in a time when the architecture of arms control is being tested, and it is our duty, just as it always has been, to safeguard the international rules-based order.

Ance Baura

## **The Road to the UN Security Council: Legal and Practical Aspects**

On the international stage, small states often seem to be but silent, unpretentious on-lookers in the presence of their much larger colleagues. But a closer look will quickly reveal that actions by these states, based on their faith in diplomacy and close cooperation, will, in fact, often be pivotal in strengthening the standing of such values as democracy, human rights, international law, and solidarity. Our statehood and sovereignty are protected by a rules-based international order – a system ensuring stability and predictability in the international arena based on respect for common rules. The United Nations is the keeper of this order and the guarantor of international law by providing a platform where all states, regardless of their size, can come together and be heard. The UN Security Council (SC) in particular is the place where decisions are taken that have a direct impact on peace and security throughout the world. That is why the primary goal of Latvia's candidacy for and participation in the UNSC is to protect and strengthen an international environment conducive to Latvia's security.

The active involvement of various states, including small ones, in global processes and the international system not only improves the functioning of this system but also increases the legitimacy of the decisions it takes. That equally applies to the work of the UNSC, especially at a time when the SC is increasingly criticised for its effectuality, transparency and ability to exercise the mandate it has been given in the context of the current geopolitical situation and the dynamic nature of threats. Countries like Russia, Belarus, North Korea, Iran and others are blatantly disrespecting the international order and challenging it through attempts to expand their spheres of influence by undermining the international system. The active participation of small states highlights the inclusive nature of the UN, reinforcing the principle that all Member States, regardless of their size, play a crucial role in international governance and the strengthening and protection of the international order. Today, the UN does not, nor will it in the foreseeable future, have a viable alternative; it is the only international platform of its kind, and the opportunities it provides are meaningful.

A seat on the UNSC provides the opportunity to highlight issues that are not only topical for the security of Latvia but for the Baltic region in general. The UNSC



and the UN as a whole can be likened to a microphone that picks up on even the quietest of words being spoken. Latvia has taken a strong stand against Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and it is planning to maintain this issue on the UNSC agenda. Furthermore, Latvia is planning to consistently address issues that it has already become an expert in, those being women's rights and empowerment, the rule-of-law and democracy, solutions for sustainability, development, and security, including in the digital and information space.

Even with the rules of the game being clearly defined to all, small countries encounter various challenges due to their size, limited human resources, global upsets, and other factors. But small countries also have many opportunities to shape and influence the international agenda and run for elected positions within international bodies, employing the resources that they often possess exclusively, such as a good reputation, a place in various groups of small states, exchanges of experience with partners, the ability to formulate and reach compromises, an innovative approach to problems, the ability to quickly adapt, as well as expertise on various specific issues.

When you think of the UNSC and its Member States, your mind probably immediately jumps to the so-called permanent members, or the "permanent five" (P5): the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and China. The P5 differ from the other Member States not only because of their permanent seat on the UNSC but also because of their exclusive veto rights, allowing them to block any decision by the UNSC. These are the countries that are most often mentioned in news headlines, as their decisions or actions (or lack thereof) often determine the UNSC response and the measures to be taken for the maintenance or restoration of international peace and security.

In turn, the 10 elected members of the UNSC, or the "elected ten" (E10), are lesser-known and rarely brought into the spotlight. The place and role of the E10 in the execution of the mandate of the UNSC, especially in the current geopolitical situation, has increased significantly. The E10 also often includes small states, whose desire to be elected to the UNSC is based in the understanding that multilateralism guarantees their existence and security, as well as ensuring a level playing ground for all states. The E10 countries are seated at the horseshoe-shaped table of the SC in alphabetical order rather than based on their affiliation with one group or another, which is somewhat symbolic of the fact that small- and medium-sized countries have an equal chance of being heard at the international level and of advancing issues that are important for them even in the shadow of the five giants. Moreover, these are often the states that will be able to find unanimity even on polarised issues in the SC, and they actively drive forward issues that are important to the international community, such as the risks presented by new technologies, cyber security, the consequences of climate change, etc.

What is the road to the UNSC like for a small country that is taking it for the first time and doing so in competition with another state? What practical preparations

need to be made for work in the UNSC, considering that some of its members harbour revisionist tendencies and will happily employ violent methods to alter the rules-based international order? How can such a country use its E10 status most effectively?

In a world experiencing ever new geopolitical upsets and facing unprecedented types of threats, the road to the UNSC has become a more difficult one in quite a practical sense, but it also offers a great many opportunities, such as “growing diplomatic muscle” and reinforcing the country’s international standing, expanding its network of contacts in regions near and far, creating new opportunities for businesses and experts in various areas, increasing the country’s visibility, strengthening expertise on many issues on which it has previously not had the opportunity to

---

The active participation of small states highlights the inclusive nature of the UN, reinforcing the principle that all Member States, regardless of their size, play a crucial role in international governance and the strengthening and protection of the international order.

---

take active engage with, and, possibly, even creating a lasting political legacy. Therefore, in a world becoming more polarised by the minute, there is no perfect formula for how to travel the road to an elected seat on the UNSC. One element is fulfilling all the legal criteria, and another is the ability to react quickly and offer innovative solutions to problems that may very well never have come to the attention of the candidate country before or during its tenure on the UNSC. This is possible when a country has reached appropriate diplomatic maturity and is willing to not only take from but also to give back to the process of strengthening and protecting of the multilateral system.

One of the main elements in the road to the UNSC is the process of preparation itself. From selecting and preparing the people to be involved to choosing the thematic focus and main emphasis in terms of content. Latvia began preparing for the UNSC when it announced its candidacy in 2011, and this became one of the country’s long-term foreign policy goals. By the official launch of Latvia’s UNSC campaign in November 2023, 12 years had already passed, and that demonstrates not only diplomatic maturity and unwavering faith in the rules-based international order, but also the sustainability and resilience of Latvia’s politics and objectives. In the situation at hand, preparations for and practical work on the UNSC demands not only that those making and executing decisions be involved at various levels and in various sectors, but also that they have a clear vision for the operationalisation of the goals and priorities that have been set. When announcing its candidacy, a state has to be ready to take several practical steps.

## Legal and practical aspects of the UN Security Council elections

The legal basis for UN Security Council elections is provided in the UN Charter: Article 23 sets out the composition of the SC, while Article 18 applies to voting procedures. The UN Charter stipulates that the General Assembly shall elect 10 non-permanent members of the UNSC with “due regard being specially paid, to the contribution of members of the United Nations to the maintenance of international peace and security and to the other purposes of the Organization, and also to equitable geographical distribution”.<sup>1</sup> In practice, this means that every June the UN General Assembly elects five new members of the UNSC, whose term in the Council begins the following January. For a country to be elected to the UNSC, it needs the support of two-thirds of UN Member States, meaning a candidate has to secure at least 129 votes out of the 193 UN Member States (this applies even if the country is running unopposed). This number can vary slightly based on the number of countries present for the vote.

Despite the UN Charter stipulating that an equitable geographic distribution is to be observed among the E10, in reality the Charter does not lay out how this is to be attained. Equitable geographic distribution is a key aspect of a country’s road to being elected to the UNSC; that is why regional groups of states have been created, serving as a springboard for the countries that wish to run for election to various UN bodies, including the UNSC. To ensure a fair and equitable representation of Member States in various bodies of the UN, five regional groups were created in the 1960s: African States; Asia-Pacific States; Eastern European States; Latin American and Caribbean States; and Western European and Other States. Each group was accordingly assigned a specific number of elected seats. It must be noted that since the creation of the aforementioned groups, dozens of new members have joined the UN, thus increasing competition within the regional groups. The Eastern European States is the smallest regional group, consisting of 23 countries, Latvia among them. This, of course, does not mean that there is no competition within the group, as the Eastern European States have been assigned just one seat to be filled by way of election for a term of two years. In recent years, competition within the Eastern European States regional group has increased, and statistics show<sup>2</sup> that out of all the UN regional groups, this is the one with the highest internal competition, despite the fact that states usually announce their candidacies decades in advance.

---

<sup>1</sup> United Nations, “United Nations Charter, Chapter V: The Security Council”, accessed on 24.06.2024, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/chapter-5>

<sup>2</sup> James Raymond Vreeland, Axel Dreher, *The Political Economy of the United Nations Security Council*, (New York, 2014), p. 133.



The author of the essay (left) representing the Eastern European States regional group in the observation and vote-counting of the UN Security Council elections, New York, 11 June 2021. Others pictured are observers from other regional groups. Photo from personal archives

When a country has decided to run for election to the UNSC, it informs the chair of its regional group, the other UN Member States, and the UN Secretariat of this decision. This step is crucial to “get your foot in the door” right away in situations where several candidates are running for the same position, because this means that extensive and active lobbying will be needed. If a country announces its candidacy as early as possible, it can use this fact to its advantage when lobbying. While this is not a decisive condition, it may very well help other countries arrive at their final decision on who to support in an election. Similarly, a decision by the regional group to support a candidate as a group, in combination with, for example, the fact that a country is running for the first time, may help it be elected to the UNSC. Quantitative data show that the longer a country has waited to be elected to the UNSC, or if it has never been elected, the better its chances are.<sup>3</sup> The situation is made more complicated if the competitor is a country with more resources and a better-established standing in UN bodies (i.e., their contribution to the maintenance of international peace and security is greater). For example, Japan, being a record-holder at UNSC elections and belonging to the Asia-Pacific States regional group, has on several occasions outcompeted smaller states in the region that have never been elected to the UNSC as they do not possess the same extent of resources

<sup>3</sup> James Raymond Vreeland, Axel Dreher, *The Political Economy of the United Nations Security Council*, (New York, 2014), p. 100.

to carry out a broad lobbying campaign in competition with such a visible and active UN Member State. In turn, in some groups, such as the African States, there is quite a clear order of rotation of states to avoid competition and provide the opportunity to work on the UNSC to as many countries as possible.

A state's international standing, consistency, and contribution to maintaining international peace and security have a major impact on its chances of being elected to the UNSC. Countries that are actively involved in UN missions, take part in humanitarian aid measures, and otherwise demonstrate themselves to be responsible members of the international community improve their chances of being elected to the UNSC. This approach to supporting candidates is also established in the UN Charter. For example, it can be said with relative certainty that Norway and Ireland were elected in 2020 not only because they had announced their candidacies a long time in advance and thus spent years lobbying, but also because of their consistent and active involvement in maintaining international peace and providing development assistance, which resonated well with the international community.

The official announcement of a candidacy is followed by hard work and often a lengthy diplomatic lobbying campaign, during which nearly all UN Member States need to be addressed. Even if a candidacy is announced a decade in advance, the lobbying work will often start immediately. The most active lobbying takes place in New York, where the UNSC is based and where it is possible to meet and talk with all the countries whose support the candidate needs to secure. Equally important is work done in the capitals and with the involvement of a broader network of embassies, representatives, and competent officials in various sectors. Candidates continue to lobby for themselves up until election day, exchanging votes, trying to obtain as many written affirmations and reiterated confirmations of support for their candidacy as possible at all levels: from election experts and ambassadors to the highest government officials. Regardless of size, each UN Member State has one vote. Even if a candidate is running unopposed, lobbying is undertaken very seriously and carefully to secure as many votes as possible, because a lack of competition does not automatically mean unanimous support from all UN members. In recent years it has become increasingly evident that candidates from the Western European and Other States group and the Eastern European States group receive relatively fewer votes, even if there is no competition. The likely reason for this is the geopolitical situation and the dynamics within different regional groups; therefore,

---

On the global stage of diplomacy, running for election to the UNSC and active participation in international formats means weaving your country's story into the tapestry of international relations, where each thread has its place and meaning.

---

even in cases where it may seem that there is no need for extensive lobbying, countries still continue to actively seek out support for their candidacy.

For example, in the UNSC elections of 2022 and 2024, candidates from all regional groups ran unopposed. In 2022, Mozambique attained a surprising result by obtaining the vote of 192 out of the total 193 Member States of the UN.<sup>4</sup> Mozambique had been officially endorsed by the African States regional group and had never previously held an elected seat on the UNSC. In turn, in 2024 Denmark received 184 votes out of 188 (two abstaining), which was a very impressive result.<sup>5</sup> Despite the lack of competition, Denmark carried out a comprehensive and consistent lobbying campaign to achieve that result. Why not just aim for the bare minimum in support? The more votes in favour, the stronger the country's mandate for its work on the UNSC, because this attests to the international community's support for that candidate.

However, there is no direct correlation between specific campaign efforts or combination of elements and the outcome of UNSC elections. The same goes for promises of support, written or oral, that may fail to be upheld for one reason or another, and seeing as voting in the UN General Assembly is done by secret ballot, it is impossible to determine which country reneged on their promise. Sometimes it may be due to a change of government in that state, where the new administration does not hold promises made by its predecessor to be binding. Or perhaps there is a discord in decision-making between the capital and the permanent mission to the UN in New York regarding support for a specific candidate. Sometimes the final decision is left to the discretion of the ambassador in New York, while promises have been handed out by someone in the capital or vice versa. Above all, immense efforts need to be made in establishing, strengthening and expanding contacts which will be important not only in securing the necessary votes for the country to be elected to the UNSC, but also in its subsequent work on the SC.

The UNSC elections are held in June, and this is one of the few matters requiring a majority of two-thirds of the members of the UN General Assembly to be present and voting. The vote is done by a secret ballot even if there is no competition and the relevant regional group has expressed its support for the candidate. In the event of a competition or if no candidate has received two-thirds of the vote, voting can be continued for several rounds. In the interim between rounds of voting, candidate countries continue actively lobbying in an attempt to ensure that the members who voted for them in the first rounds will continue to do so in the next rounds, while at the same time also attempting to secure support from countries that may be willing to change their vote in subsequent rounds. Some countries will commit to supporting a specific candidate through all rounds of voting, while others may

---

<sup>4</sup> United Nations, "Five countries elected to serve on UN Security Council", 9 June 2022, accessed on 30.06.2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/06/1120052>.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations, "Pakistan, Somalia, Panama, Denmark & Greece elected to UN Security Council", 6 June 2024, accessed on 30.06.2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xoIy1QVWM34>.



Latvian peace-keepers taking part in the UN peace-keeping mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in 2023. On the day of the raising of the Latvian flag at the NAQOURA base in Lebanon, 1 September 2023.

Photo: Christian Donadeo (ITA), UNIFIL/ SHAMA/SW HQ PIO

change their decision based on the understanding that any promises of support are no longer binding in subsequent rounds or under the influence of events taking place in the UN General Assembly Hall. Having been elected, the country will commence its work on the UNSC in six months' time.

## Practical work within the UN Security Council

So far, Latvian representatives have been in the UNSC meeting hall only as observers or to speak at specific meetings with special authorisation from the presidency of the UNSC. Latvia is still only waiting its turn to be able to sit at the UNSC table in 2026-2027 and to take advantage of the opportunity to shape and influence the UNSC agenda. What happens in the UNSC meeting hall is merely the tip of the iceberg. What is not as clearly evident when watching from the sidelines is the immense work that is done every day to prepare for these meetings – spending long hours in negotiating rooms and coordination meetings, working on sanctions committees and managing thematic files. And above all, compromises need to be found with other countries, all while protecting your own interests and those of others. Everyone who has been part of the election campaign and the practical work at the UNSC is like a small cog in the huge mechanism.

Although the elected members of the UNSC are there for only two years and they cannot be immediately re-elected for another term, in recent years the E10 have been using their term in office increasingly effectively and boldly, both individually and in blocs. The E10 have made a meaningful contribution to the work of the UNSC, especially by improving working methods and procedures, as well as by regularly placing hitherto undiscussed issues on the UNSC agenda. For instance, Estonia: not only did it innovatively streamline working methods and adapt them to the COVID-19 pandemic situation, but it also included cyber security issues on the agenda for the first time. The countries elected to the UNSC in June 2024, which will commence their term in office in January 2025 (Denmark, Greece and Panama), are ready to highlight on the agenda such issues as the challenges and risks to international peace and security arising from climate change, which Russia and China are objecting to, arguing that these matters have no place on the UNSC agenda.<sup>6</sup> This is an excellent example of how E10 countries not only find creative ways to efficiently use their time on the UNSC, but also employ existing mechanisms to keep the UNSC agenda up-to-date and appropriate to the current international situation.

The E10 have several options at their disposal for shaping and influencing the UNSC agenda and its outcomes. I have to reiterate that one of the simplest ways to do this is by voting on various issues. Each member of the UNSC has one vote. Even though the E10 do not have veto rights, their votes can still decide whether a resolution is passed or determine the results of procedural votes where the P5 do not have veto rights. As mentioned previously, the E10 demonstrate their position and responsibility most visibly on issues that have a direct impact on the working methods of the UNSC. An example from recent history is the COVID-19 pandemic, which required the SC to quickly adapt to new circumstances. The E10, with the Dominican Republic and Estonia at the forefront, used their presidencies to establish basic guidelines, introduce temporary measures, and elaborate modalities guaranteeing the continuity of the work of the UNSC in circumstances when meeting in person was not possible. Efforts of the E10 to ensure a more equitable approach in the selection of chairs of committees and a fairer distribution of work have created more opportunities for the elected members to affect the work and results of the UNSC on issues where the P5 still hold a significant monopoly. Due to closer internal coordination among the E10, in recent years they have distinguished themselves as a separate bloc, which has been of special importance in the current situation. This is a major advantage when proposing and discussing new initiatives.

Working methods is also an area where the elected members can create a lasting legacy, and it is a priority for countries that have joined the Accountability, Co-

---

<sup>6</sup> Security Council Report, "Security Council Elections 2024", accessed on 30.06.2024, [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/unsc\\_elections\\_2024.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/unsc_elections_2024.pdf).



herence and Transparency Group, including Latvia. Likewise, we have to mention the so-called “veto initiative” proposed by Liechtenstein, supported and seconded by many E10 countries. The initiative aims to promote the more responsible use of veto rights in the UNSC. This is the tangible result of efforts to ensure that countries like Russia cannot sweep issues that are important for the global community under the rug.

It is crucial for newly elected members to be aware of and understand the UNSC working mechanisms and decision-making procedures as soon as possible – and prior to commencing practical work – so that they may use their two years on the SC as efficiently as possible. This is another aspect where the P5 have an advantage, because they possess a vast institutional memory and years of experience that many E10 countries do not have for obvious reasons. The better grasp those involved in the work of the UNSC have on its working methods, the more level the playing field for the P5 and the E10. For this reason, newly elected UNSC Member States are involved in various events and processes that allow them to prepare for their two years on the UNSC as much as possible. Some governments and the UN Secretariat in collaboration with think-tanks offer training courses for newly elected UNSC members. These courses help introduce the incoming E10 countries to the operating principles of the SC, its procedures, and its working methods, so that, come January of the following year, they will be ready to hit the ground running at the UNSC.

Likewise, some countries will arrange to “shadow” current UNSC Member States to observe the practical behind-the-scenes work of the UNSC. All of this is extremely useful for small countries, especially those who have rarely or never before been on the UNSC and have not had the same opportunities to accumulate an institutional memory as the countries that are elected to the UNSC more often. A country can be under-prepared, but there is absolutely no risk of being over-prepared.

Insight into the many different thematic items on the UNSC agenda must also be formed and accumulated. Actively following the work of the UNSC, participating in UNSC open debates, thorough involvement in the work of committees, and the strategic use of the presidency month are the ways in which a small country can efficiently prepare for and use its time on the UNSC. One of the most important (and also one of the most intense) periods during a country’s tenure on the UNSC is its presidency, during which it can place special focus on security issues that are important to the country and/or its region. Each member of the UNSC has the opportunity to hold the presidency for one month based on a rotation principle in alphabetical order (using the English language). This is the most direct way for a UNSC member to affect the UNSC agenda.

Looking ahead, we can expect to see the political polarisation of the UNSC to continue, and all of the elected members will have to be able to work in an environment that is not conducive to compromise. It can be expected that Russia will continue its destructive actions and will use any opportunity to paralyse or rearrange

the work of the UNSC to favour its imperialistic interests and protect its allies and clients who are the subjects of several items on the UNSC agenda (e.g., Mali, North Korea, etc.).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Russia is trying to use the UNSC as a platform for distributing its propaganda and disinformation by openly trying to undermine the reliability of the SC, as well as by challenging the international rules-based order. The range of topics and issues where the UNSC is able to find common ground is narrowing and discussions at the SC are becoming increasingly difficult and lengthy, thus it is all the more important for the E10 to play a bigger role and be ever more active in providing a balancing effect in the work of the UNSC. Many former and current E10 countries have become compromise-seekers; these are often small countries, such as Estonia, Malta, Albania and others. The UNSC needs more members that will safeguard the international order and be willing to actively work to strengthen and protect it from the revisionist tendencies of certain countries. Latvia will fulfil these duties excellently.

Holding a seat on the UNSC is an experience that generations of diplomats have been preparing us for consciously and unconsciously, and it will be the legacy that we leave for future generations.

On the global stage of diplomacy, running for election to the UNSC and active participation in international formats means weaving your country's story into the tapestry of international relations, where each thread has its place and meaning. It is nothing short of symbolic, then, that one wall of the UN headquarters in New York is decorated with a tapestry made by artist Edīte Pauls-Vīgnere and gifted to the Organisation by Latvia; entitled "Hope", its central feature is the Freedom Monument of Latvia, and it serves as a reminder that we are here at the United Nations to protect and strengthen the international environment and international order that guarantees our sovereignty and the protection of our interests. Standing idly and silently by is a deliberate choice, with all its consequences. We cannot afford to do so. Through active participation, we are taking responsibility for the direction in which the world we share is going.

---

<sup>7</sup> Richard Gowan, "The UN Security Council in the New Era of Great Power Competition", viewed on 30.06.2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/un-security-council-new-era-great-power-competition>.

IV

**LATVIA'S  
SPECIALISATION  
AT THE UN:  
INTERNATIONAL  
LAW AND  
WOMEN'S RIGHTS**

Agnese Vilde

# Latvia's Contribution to the Gender Equality Agenda of the UN

## The Evolution of Women's Rights at the UN

Ensuring the equal rights of men and women and the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women are fundamental human rights and values of the United Nations. Guaranteeing the comprehensive, effective and meaningful participation of women in all areas of life by protecting their rights and promoting their empowerment is a fundamental element of the work of the UN today. Yet women still face discrimination in many parts of the world. Therefore, these issues are regularly examined at the UN Member States' level, providing the opportunity to share best practices, propose joint actions, and set targets, for which the UN can provide practical support.

Driven by the international women's movement, the term "women's rights" began to gain ground at the global level in the mid-1980s. In 1993, at the World Conference on Human Rights, women's rights were finally clearly proclaimed to be human rights. The slogan "Women's Rights Are Human Rights" was already widely used by the feminist movement in the 1980s, but it reached its heyday at the Fourth World Conference on Women hosted by Beijing in 1995, where U.S. First Lady Hillary Clinton addressed the representatives of 189 nations with the following words: "If there is one message that echoes forth from this conference, let it be that human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights once and for all."<sup>1</sup>

The Beijing Conference would become a pivotal point in the history of the evolution of women's rights. It concluded with the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which detailed the commitment to promote women's equality. Among the 12 areas defined, eliminating violence against women was for the first time stated as a separate area of action for the UN. For comparison: this area is not highlighted in the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Later, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace

---

<sup>1</sup> United Nations, UN News, "Stories from the UN Archive: Hillary Clinton's bold stand in Beijing", accessed 24.07.2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1147572>.

and Security, adopted in 2000, would lay the foundation for the understanding prevalent today – that violence against women is a matter of security and human rights, and during armed conflict it is a war crime.

From this point forward, the gender equality aspect was included in all UN policy areas and its efforts to promote peace, security and human rights. This is also a fundamental value of other international and regional organisations; for instance, the European Union has integrated gender equality measures into various policy areas and instruments. But it is not enough to fortify legal norms and draft policy documents. In reality, efforts to guarantee gender equality are still being impeded by stereotypes and skewed attitudes, manifesting as unequal pay, less inclusion into the labour market and less representation in positions of leadership. Technological development has unfortunately not helped reduce inequality in the economic opportunities available to men and women. Globally, over 2.7 billion women are legally restricted from having the same choice of jobs as men, placing women in an unequal position to men right from the outset.<sup>2</sup>

Not all women have access to social protection, which, in turn, increases income inequality and places them at greater risk of poverty in the event of becoming unemployed, giving birth, falling ill, or other situations where they cannot work.

Promoting women's economic empowerment is a crucial part of ensuring gender equality and sustainable development. This empowerment can be made possible through education, as well as increased involvement in science, technologies, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Education also plays a pivotal role in relation to the ability to follow rapid technological change and thus be more competitive on the labour market. Furthermore, women's involvement in business and work-life balance are also key factors.

These issues are of importance to all countries of the world – therefore, the best recommendations for improving the existing situation are sought at the UN. However, discussions at the UN on gender equality have been demonstrating a negative trend for several years already: there are countries that do not wish to reinforce previously adopted standards, and attempts have been made to reword them and water them down. There is a special term to describe such efforts: “pushback on gender equality”. For example, a subject of extremely heated discussion at the UN is reinforcing the prohibition on discrimination, and another is references to women's sexual and reproductive health and rights. There are countries that oppose a strengthening of the role of the non-governmental sector. However, there is also a positive trend: more and more young women are taking a stand for a democratic society and human rights, readily taking on leadership roles and driving forward change.

---

<sup>2</sup> UN WOMEN, “Facts and figures: Economic empowerment”, accessed 31.05.2024, <https://www.un-women.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/facts-and-figures>.

## Latvia's Contribution in Promoting Women's Rights and Opportunities at the UN

Gender equality and the promotion women's rights and opportunities has become one of Latvia's human rights priorities at international organisations. Has this been a purposely defined priority, or is it the logical result of a string of coincidences? Having been witness to several of the situations described below, I have to say that opportunities have been used at the right time and place, and this topic has now become part of Latvia's working profile within the UN.

Having joined the United Nations after the restoration of independence, Latvia was mainly guided by the necessity at that time to cement its return to the international arena and address politically important issues, such as securing the adoption of a UN resolution on the complete withdrawal of foreign military forces from the territories of the Baltic States and stopping resolutions proposed by the

---

The public, private and non-governmental sector have all had a significant role to play in the promotion of women's engagement and economic empowerment.

---

Russian Federation on the situation of human rights situation in Estonia and Latvia. Back then, deliberately chosen thematic priorities for Latvia in the UN had not yet become clearly defined. That began to change after Latvia joined the EU and had to take part in formulating the common EU position on all items on the UN agenda. The protection of human rights and gender equality is one of the main priorities of the EU at the UN. With the regular participation of Latvian diplomats at these discussions, opportunities started to present themselves for Latvia to take a more active part in discussions on shaping global

human rights standards. Thanks to the substantive support provided by experts at the Ministry of Welfare of the Republic of Latvia and NGOs, our involvement deepened.

Latvia's statistics were also grounds for confidence that Latvia had experience and best practices to share at the global level. In terms of women's professional representation, in several sectors Latvia is among the leading Member States of the EU. For example, Latvia has the highest percentage of women in parliament out of all the Baltic States, with female MPs accounting for around 30% of the parliament in the last two convocations.<sup>3</sup> In Latvia, women have held the positions of President of State, Speaker of Parliament, Prime Minister and various line ministers. Distin-

---

<sup>3</sup> Official Statistics Portal, "Gender equality: power and decision-making", <https://stat.gov.lv/en/statistics-themes/indicators-well-being-and-equality/gender-equality/6298-gender-equality-power-and?themeCode=GE>

guished professionals in their respective areas have been in high posts at international institutions, such as NATO, the UN and the EU. Around 45% of ambassadors in Latvia's foreign service are women.<sup>4</sup> The judicial system has a consistently high proportion of women: 82% of judges, 88% of notaries and 60% of prosecutors are women.<sup>5</sup> Latvia ranks above the global average in terms of the proportion of women on corporate boards, where nearly a fourth of all board members are women – the highest indicator in the Baltic States.<sup>6</sup> Latvia also boasts the highest proportion of women inventors among the members of the European Patent Office: 30.6% (as compared to the European average of 13.2%).<sup>7</sup> Latvia has the highest representation of women scientists in Europe – 51% – and, in general, more young women than men have been obtaining degrees in higher education for some time already.<sup>8</sup>

In 2023, Latvia ranked number 13 out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum.<sup>9</sup> In turn, the World Bank has, for several consecutive years already, ranked Latvia among the 14 countries of the world that ensure complete gender equality at a legislative level, alongside Belgium, Denmark, France, Luxembourg and Sweden.<sup>10</sup>

At the national level, the Ministry of Welfare of the Republic of Latvia has been elaborating medium-term policy planning documents since 2003 aimed at reinforcing the promotion of equal rights for women and men in employment, education, and healthcare, as well as at reducing domestic violence and violence against women. Today, special attention is focused on equal opportunities in the labour market and in education, reducing negative gender stereotypes, and integrating the gender equality principle into policy planning.

The public, private and non-governmental sector have all had a significant role to play in the promotion of women's engagement and economic empowerment. For instance, organisation RigaTechGirls encourages women to learn digital skills so that

---

<sup>4</sup> Data at the disposal of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia as of 01.04.2024.

<sup>5</sup> Official Statistics Portal, "Gender equality: power and decision-making", <https://stat.gov.lv/en/statistics-themes/indicators-well-being-and-equality/gender-equality/6298-gender-equality-power-and?themeCode=GE>

<sup>6</sup> Official Statistics Portal, "Gender equality: employment and earnings", <https://stat.gov.lv/en/statistics-themes/indicators-well-being-and-equality/gender-equality/6300-gender-equality?themeCode=GE>

<sup>7</sup> Patent Office, "Having analysed invention and patent submission data EPO study finds that Latvia has the highest proportion of women inventors" [available only in Latvian], accessed 31.05.2024, <https://www.lrpv.gov.lv/lv/jaunums/analizejot-izgudrojumu-un-patentu-pieteikumu-datus-epo-pe-tijuma-konstate-eiropa-lielakais-sieviesu-izgudrotaju-ipatsvars-ir-latvija>.

<sup>8</sup> Official Statistics Portal, "Gender equality: education and science", <https://stat.gov.lv/en/statistics-themes/indicators-well-being-and-equality/gender-equality/6301-gender-equality-education?themeCode=GE>

<sup>9</sup> World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report", accessed 31.05.2024, <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023/>.

<sup>10</sup> World Bank Group, "Women, Business and the Law", accessed 31.05.2024, <https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl>.

they can be not only consumers but also creators of technology. For several years, RigaTechGirls has been implementing projects providing free IT courses to women and girls, allowing them to develop skills that are important in the sector. We have showcased this initiative at various international formats, including the UN. This organisation has also been involved in promoting cooperation with countries from other regions of the world, such as African countries.

Women who are leaders in their professions can set an encouraging and inspiring example for other women's career development. One of the most active organisations in Latvia in this regard is the association "Lidere" (female leader), uniting businesswomen and upper-level managers. The association aims to promote women's initiatives, is developing a mentoring movement in Latvia, and is promoting women's participation in public life and socially responsible business.

The private sector in Latvia regularly takes part in events promoting women's economic empowerment. For example, banks pay special attention to the gender equality issue in human resources and business management.

At UN discussions, Latvia has always emphasised the role of NGOs in promoting women's engagement in all decision-making processes. Without the involvement and expertise of NGOs, it would not be possible to provide comprehensive support for women in crisis situations, e.g., having been subjected to violence or human trafficking. MARTA Centre is an exemplary organisation that has also gained international recognition for the support it provides to women who have become victims of violence.

Promoting gender equality is also a priority in Latvia's cooperation policy. Latvia has provided assistance to Eastern Partnership and Central Asian countries in their efforts to ensure gender equality, and projects have also been implemented in Africa. Currently, it is imperative to provide support to women and girls in Ukraine who have suffered sexual violence at the hands of Russian aggressors.

Latvia's statistics and previously implemented initiatives solidified the conviction of Latvian diplomats and experts that we ought to take a more active part in international-level discussions on promoting gender equality and women's economic empowerment so that Latvia could have an impact on decisions about policy and actions to be taken. But yet another factor driving Latvia's active involvement on these matters was institutional change at the United Nations itself. To lessen the institutional fragmentation of the UN and consolidate the provision of practical support for promoting women's rights around the world, the UN Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (UN WOMEN)<sup>11</sup> was established in 2010.

This body sets the global standards on gender equality and works with governments and civil society to draft the laws, policies, programmes and services needed for the effective introduction of gender equality standards. Soon after UN WOMEN

---

<sup>11</sup> UN WOMEN, <https://www.unwomen.org>.



was established, Latvia had the opportunity to run for election to the board of this UN body, in which 41 countries are represented and which approves the strategic priorities for the work done by UN WOMEN. Latvia was elected to the board for the 2013–2015 term, and, moreover, Normans Penke, Latvia's Permanent Representative to the UN, was elected as Chair of the Board in 2013. Latvia is also currently on the board of UN WOMEN until 2025, and has been financially supporting its work for years. This partnership is also appreciated by the UN, as has been attested to by Sima Sami Iskandar Bahous, Executive Director of UN WOMEN, when she met with the Prime Minister of Latvia in New York in March 2024.

2015 has been marked in UN history as the year when new global sustainable development goals were formulated to replace the unachieved Millennium Development Goals. Latvia was among the countries that strictly demanded a separate goal for gender equality and called for a definition of specific and measurable targets in this area. Latvia took part in debates both individually and on behalf of the Baltic States, as well as through reinforcing the common EU position on gender equality issues. Following extensive inter-governmental negotiations, the UN set the intention to ensure gender quality by 2030 as the fifth of its 17 Sustainable Development Goals. This goal includes the full and effective participation of women and equal opportunities to assume leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life, as well as the elimination of all kinds of violence or discrimination against women and girls. Latvia's contribution in the shaping of the UN Sustainable Development Goals was in large part the result of the work done by Aija Žigūre, the long-standing Head of the Central Statistical Bureau (1998-2023), who, as a member of the UN Statistics Commission, helped elaborate the indicators for measuring progress on the goals.

The turning point that truly solidified gender equality and women's empowerment as Latvia's thematic priorities within the UN, to my mind, was Latvia's Presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2015. A 20-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action had been planned to be carried out at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW)<sup>12</sup> session in March of that year, which would bring together leaders and NGO representatives from around the world. To mark this anniversary, a political declaration was planned to be drafted to reiterate the commitments laid out in the Beijing Platform. In preparation for Latvia's Presidency of the Council of the EU, it was decided that gender equality would be one of Latvia's priorities at the UN in New York. Diplomats from Latvia's Mission to the UN actively participated in the preparation of the UNCSW session. As part of this process, I was responsible for coordinating the common position of the Member

---

<sup>12</sup> The UNCSW collects information about equal rights of women and empowerment throughout the world, and shapes global standards for the promotion of gender equality. The annual session of the UNCSW is held in March, and it has become the second largest event at the UN in New York, bringing together many thousands of participants.

States of the EU and for representing it at UN intergovernmental negotiations on the political declaration. Lasting two months, the negotiation process was difficult, with frequent clashes of opinion, long night sessions, and many parallel informal consultations with various partners. But overall, the role of lead EU negotiator and thorough immersion in the topic helped solidify Latvia's profile at the UN on gender equality issues. In contrast to similar documents drafted previously, this time negotiations led to the inclusion of more action-oriented commitments and language on the role of civil society. The Latvian Presidency of the Council of the EU drafted and adopted Council Conclusions on Gender in Development. In this context, coordinated action by our diplomats and experts in Riga, Brussels and New York, and the substantive support provided, altogether yielded results and demonstrated the skills of Latvian diplomats at an international level.

The Presidency of the Council of the EU secured Latvia's authority at high-level events of the UN Commission on the Status of Women which were attended by Latvian government officials. In collaboration with UN WOMEN and the United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organisation (UNESCO), Latvia organised a high-level discussion in New York on women and girls in STEM. The event was attended by officials and NGO experts from Latvia, the United States and India, thus attesting to the topicality of the matter in all regions of the world. The value of such events lies within the fact that they provide an opportunity to showcase Latvia's achievements in gender equality and women's empowerment.

---

The Presidency of the Council of the EU secured Latvia's authority at high-level events of the UN Commission on the Status of Women which were attended by Latvian government officials.

---

In subsequent years, Latvia has continued to actively take advantage of the opportunity to organise thematic discussions at the UN in collaboration with like-minded partners from other regions and the non-governmental sector. Such discussions have been held, for example, on women's political and economic representation, the prevention of violence and health issues, women's involvement in information and communication technologies, gender data in monitoring the SDGs, women journalists, and women in Ukraine in the context of Russia's aggression.

In 2020, Latvia was elected to the UN Commission on the Status of Women for the first time, with a mandate until 2025. Seeing an opportunity to strengthen its contribution and visibility within the UN, Latvia volunteered to work on the Bureau of the Commission, and Māris Burbergs, a diplomat from Latvia's Mission to the UN in New York, has served as Deputy Head of the Bureau for three sessions and has also presided over negotiations on improving the working methods of the Commission. In 2024,



**Meeting with Suzi Carla Barbosa, Minister of Foreign Affairs, International Cooperation and Communities of the Republic of Guinea-Bissau, at a discussion on Women, Peace and Security activities, 8 February 2023. From the left: Undine Andersone-Krūmiņa (Human Rights Expert at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia), Iluta Lāce (Head of MARTA Centre), Eunice Lopes Queta Esteves (Head of the Office of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Guinea-Bissau), Suzi Carla Barbosa (Minister of Foreign Affairs of Guinea-Bissau), Gunda Reire (Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia), Agnese Vilde (author of this essay), Jolanta Armaloviča-Rauza (representative of the National Armed Forces of Latvia), Anda Poro (Head of the Middle East and Africa Division at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia). Photo: Alvis Dadzis, Ministry of Foreign Affairs**

the Latvian delegation to the UNCSW session was headed by Prime Minister Evika Siliņa, who confirmed to all other UN Member States the importance of this topic and this format for Latvia. I believe it is crucial for Latvia's NGO sector to also take part in the work of UNCSW. For that reason, Iluta Lāce, Head of MARTA Centre, has on several occasions been invited to participate as an expert in discussions on gender-based violence.

Gender equality and eliminating gender-based violence was also one of the main priorities while Latvia was a member to the UN Human Rights Council (2015–2017) and presided over the Arms Trade Treaty (2018–2019). The importance of this topic is further evidenced by Latvia's support for UN resolutions and action-oriented initiatives proposed by the UN or like-minded countries. There is one example I would like to especially highlight: the Icelandic initiative for men's greater involvement in promoting gender equality, the so-called Barbershop Initiative, where the topic becomes the centre of discussion for men rather than women, as is usually the case.

A popular way to raise an issue at the UN is by creating informal groups of friends. These bring together like-minded countries that wish to advocate for a

specific topic. Latvia has joined the UN groups of friends focused on promoting the Women, Peace and Security agenda, advocating for the elimination of violence against women and girls, and promoting gender equality throughout the UN system. Less formal channels for exchange of information also prove useful, such as networking among women ambassadors to the UN.

At the moment, one of Latvia's foreign policy objectives is gaining a seat on the UN Security Council for the 2026–2027 term. In order to achieve this, Latvia needs to receive at least 129 votes from UN members in the election in 2025. Latvia's distinct contribution to the UN agenda will certainly help these chances. Even though in some UN Member States promoting women's rights can be a sensitive issue due to religion, culture or traditions, facilitating women's engagement and economic empowerment has still become a crucial horizontal issue throughout all policy areas and discussions at the UN, and it is a topical issue for all countries. The experiences of other countries that have run for election to the UN Security Council show that this topic has been highlighted among campaign priorities. Latvia's campaign also spotlights the country's outstanding results in the proportion of women's representation, which is a prerequisite to being able to actively advocate for women's rights issues at the UN level.

## Women, Peace and Security

Over recent decades, the UN has increasingly started to focus on the Women, Peace and Security agenda, which, in practice, means more involvement of women in the promotion of international peace and security. In 2000, during Namibia's Presidency, the UN Security Council unanimously approved Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. This and nine subsequent UN Security Council resolutions on the issue of women, peace and security form the legal basis for women's representation and involvement in the resolution of armed conflicts and in peace processes. Despite the proportionally lower involvement of women in peace-keeping and conflict resolution, the different experiences of women make their opinion no less important in peace negotiations. Moreover, the high number of crimes of sexual violence against women perpetrated and gone unpunished during wartime was another reason for countries to agree at the UN level on common action and measures. The fact that all 15 Member States, including the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, were able to agree on this resolution is a significant achievement.

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 is binding to all UN members. Raising women's engagement and representation in conflict resolution, as well as women's representation in UN peace-keeping operations, has become a priority for the United Nations. Each year, the UN Security Council reviews a report by the UN Secretary-General on progress achieved in this area. A special emphasis is placed

on gender-based sexual violence in armed conflict. However, these issues fall not only under the purview of the United Nations – the EU and NATO also have action plans on Women, Peace and Security. In 2024, NATO committed to integrating the Women, Peace and Security perspective in all areas of action, including missions. It is expected that NATO Member States will duly take this policy into account.

The National Armed Forces of Latvia are still one of the leading NATO armed forces in terms of women's representation, with women accounting for 18%,<sup>13</sup> which is above the NATO average of 10%. Latvia is among the countries where women have no restrictions on the posts they may assume within the Armed Forces. In 2018, a woman was appointed as chaplain of the National Armed Forces for the first time; in 2020, the first woman in Latvia's history received the rank of colonel and the first woman was appointed as Latvia's resident military attaché abroad (in the United States).

Currently, around 110 countries around the world are implementing national action plans on Women, Peace and Security.<sup>14</sup> Some countries are implementing their third or even fourth such plans. In response to increasing calls from international partners for Latvia to also elaborate a policy in this area, upon the initiative of the diplomats at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in collaboration with sectoral institutions and NGOs, Latvia's first National Action Plan on the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in Latvia for the period of 2020–2025 was drafted and approved in 2020. The contribution of Ambassador Aiga Liepiņa and the support provided by the Canadian Embassy in Latvia is deserving of special mention here. The targets of the plan were adapted to the situation in Latvia, with consideration for the capacity and resources available to institutions. Areas of action focused on raising awareness and knowledge in the general public, and the younger generation especially, on gender equality and the elimination of gender-based violence. The plan envisions training for the defence and interior sectors and the establishment of a gender equality consultant position. As part of the international dimension of the action plan, Latvia will share its expertise and know-how with other countries. Measures are being implemented in cooperation with line ministries and NGOs. The implementation of this action plan has been part of the last three Government Action Plans in Latvia. A mid-term review of the action plan has been scheduled for the end of 2024, which will help identify in a timely manner the aspects that still need to be improved upon in the remaining period of the plan's validity (until the end of 2025) and in the drafting of the next action plan.

---

<sup>13</sup> Women in active service in the National Armed Forces (professional service and the Land Guard), Data at the disposal of the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia as of 31.12.2023.

<sup>14</sup> A map of the Women, Peace and Security national action plans that have been adopted throughout the world is available here: WPS Focal Points Network, "Global Map of Adopted National Action Plans", accessed 31.05.2024, <https://wpsfocalpointnetwork.org/resources/>.

Latvia has examples of best practice in the area of Women, Peace and Security. The Latvian Transatlantic Organisation (LATO) organises a mentoring programme where young professional women who wish to work in security or foreign affairs have the opportunity to build contacts and learn from the experience of seasoned women professionals and to further their education. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia in collaboration with the Clingendael Institute in the Netherlands and LATO has organised training on leading international peace negotiations for women professionals working in security and foreign affairs. In support of the Ukraine's efforts, MARTA Centre has helped raise the issue of Ukraine's National Action Plan, a mobile group has been established to help document war crimes, and practical, psychological, legal and medical aid is being provided to victims of sexual violence. Foreign partners have recognised the involvement of publicly well-known, high-level professionals, such as Baiba Braže, Iluta Lāce, Lotte Tisenkopfa-Iltnerē, Anna Andersone, as a valuable approach to promoting the issue and educating a wider audience about it. The visibility of the issue is further promoted by the organisation Women for Security, founded in 2023.

Similar trends are evident in the implementation of national action plans at a global level. The main challenges are the following: a lack of dedicated budget resources for policy implementation and activities or a lack of a regular reporting mechanism, insufficient inter-institutional cooperation, and insufficient involvement of the non-governmental sector. In Latvia, training for the defence and interior sector and the establishment of a gender equality consultant remain outstanding issues. Support and advice from international partners are of importance here as well – therefore, Latvia has established regular cooperation with Canada. The Nordic countries are interested in discussing these issues within the Nordic–Baltic (NB8) format. An exchange of information at an international level takes place through the Women, Peace and Security Focal Points Network. This was set up in 2016 and unites over 100 countries and organisations. I have been Head of the Latvian Focal Point since 2021, when I took these duties over from Ambassadors Aiga Liepiņa and Ilze Rūse.

The topic of Women, Peace and Security is among Latvia's priorities within its campaign for the 2025 elections of the UN Security Council. The practical support Latvia has provided so far in the context of this agenda has been related to assisting victims of sexual violence, especially those victimised by Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Following the visit of Pramila Patten, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, to Latvia in 2023, we have established cooperation with the United Nations in this specific area, too. Latvia has provided financial support for the Office of the Special Representative to carry out activities in Ukraine.

At UN debates, Latvia will continue to consistently take a stand against sexual violence in armed conflict. A more focused approach to the issue will help



**Evika Siliņa, Prime Minister of Latvia, chairing the High-Level Discussion of the UN Committee on the Status of Women in New York, 12 March 2024. In the background: Sanita Pavļuta-Deslandes, Permanent Representative of Latvia to the UN, and Māris Burbergs, diplomat at the Permanent Mission.**

Photo: Gatis Rozenfelds, State Chancellery

Latvia cultivate its substantive expertise in preparation for working on the UN Security Council. In the event of election to the Security Council, Latvia will have the opportunity to be part of the Council working group on Women, Peace and Security.

2025 will mark 25 years since the adoption of Resolution 1325. Latvia must continue to participate in Women, Peace and Security events and initiatives in order to contribute to the development of this area. It is also important to strengthen cooperation with countries in other regions, including countries in Africa, that are active in this area. In addition to the work done on this issue at an international level, it is furthermore crucial to reinforce institutional cooperation at a national level.

In conclusion, allow me to cite an interesting fact. In its nearly 80 years of existence, the highest position in the United Nations has never been held by a woman. This is no longer an issue regarding other UN leadership positions – however, the glass ceiling for the highest seat is yet to be shattered. Let us recall that the nomination of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga, President of Latvia (1999-2007), who was backed by all three Baltic States as a candidate for the post of UN Secretary-General in 2006,

was a very strong one. Since then, several other women have also been nominated, but without any success. Today, the question of whether the 2026 elections of the Secretary-General will bring any change is being asked with increasing frequency in corridors of the UN. The basic criterion is, of course, the need to agree on the most qualified person for the job, but the saying “practice what you preach” would seem to be applicable to the UN as an organisation in this case.



Kristine Līce

# Settlement of International Disputes: What Good is the UN?

The United Nations could well be the most criticised international organisation in the world. It is criticised for its inability to resolve existing conflicts and prevent new ones, its double standards, and the fact that the countries represented on the Security Council, which is the only UN body with the authority to take decisions on the use of military force, do not reflect the modern-day world order. On the other end of the complaint spectrum there are doubts about the UN infringing upon the sovereignty of states and the imposition of globalisation.

The list of criticisms goes on and on, even if the justification of some of them is debatable, since the ability of the UN to act as an organisation is determined by the willingness of its Member States to allow it to do so. However, not to overly focus on the “#AllBad” mentality, this essay will examine one aspect of the United Nations from a different perspective and seek to answer the question of what good, if any, the UN does do in the settlement of international disputes. To answer this question, the essay will look at the legally binding international dispute settlement mechanisms created by the UN and whether these have strengthened international rule of law.

## A Promising Start

Founded in 1945, the United Nations embodies the “Never Again” commitment of the winners of World War II, to never again allow destructive world wars and to never again allow the dehumanisation of a group of people. This commitment is also at the heart of the UN purposes defined in Article 1 of the Charter of the UN<sup>1</sup>: “To maintain international peace and security [...] and to bring about by peaceful means [...] adjustment or settlement of international disputes”. This commitment also forms the basis of the obligation of UN Member States as described in Article 2 of the UN Charter “to refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state”.

---

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Charter, adopted on 26 June 1945.

Thus, in essence, the UN Charter is a continuation of the conceptual move towards the prohibition of war set in motion by the 1928 General Treaty for the Renunciation of War as an Instrument of National Policy, also known as the Kellogg-Briand Pact. It should be noted that it was in response to a violation of this 1928 treaty that the United States formulated the so-called Stimson Doctrine, i.e., the principle of non-recognition of any alteration of the territory of a state or the creation of new states as a result of aggression or the use of armed force. The Stimson Doctrine would later become a key element for substantiating the continuity of the statehood of the Baltic States.

The obligation of UN Member States to refrain from the use of force in settling disputes does not mean that disputes between countries simply disappear. It means they undertake to settle such disputes in a peaceful manner. For this commitment to go beyond an abstract theory, a viable alternative to armed force is needed, i.e., international-level mechanisms for dispute settlement that are both legitimate and effective at yielding legally binding results whilst also respecting the independence and sovereign equality of states. The alternative to force provided by the UN is the International Court of Justice (ICJ). This, then, is the first contribution of the United Nations to the peaceful settlement of international disputes – a safe space to do so.

## The teleology of the ICJ

Alongside the General Assembly and the Security Council, the ICJ is one of the main institutions of the United Nations. Pursuant to Article 92 of the UN Charter, it is the principal judicial organ of the UN, tasked with examining disputes between states and providing advisory opinions on legal questions. The International Court of Justice consists of 15 full-time judges, elected for a term of nine years (with the possibility of re-election) by the UN General Assembly and Security Council through an intricate election procedure. Traditionally, candidates nominated by any of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council have always been elected to the ICJ; however, in 2017, the UK candidate was not re-elected for a second term and was replaced with the candidate from India, while in 2023, the Russian candidate was voted off the ICJ and replaced with the candidate nominated by Romania.

Keeping in mind the objective of this essay, it could be posited that the existence of the International Court of Justice as such already constitutes a potential for a benefit. The ICJ is an independent and universal institution, meaning that as a mechanism for dispute settlement it covers a wide range of disputes in terms of substance and geography, with a pre-determined procedure equally applicable to all cases eliminating any arbitrariness and ensuring equality between all parties



The International Court of Justice examining the case of Allegations of Genocide under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Ukraine v. Russian Federation) (the “Genocide Convention”), September 2023. Photo: International Court of Justice.

involved. However, whether a potential benefit translates into an real one may only be determined by looking at the work of the ICJ in settling disputes between states and providing advisory opinions.

Interstate disputes may presented before the ICJ if the states have consented to it, and this consent can be expressed in one of three ways. The first is recognition of the compulsory jurisdiction of the ICJ. Pursuant to Article 36.2 of the Statute of the International Court of Justice,<sup>2</sup> any state that is party to the ICJ (meaning any UN Member State, because Article 93.1 of the UN Charter stipulates that all members of the United Nations are parties to the Statute of the International Court of Justice) may at any time declare that they recognise as compulsory *ipso facto* and without special agreement, in relation to any other state accepting the same obligation, the jurisdiction of the Court in all legal disputes concerning: (1) the interpretation of a treaty; (2) any question of international law; (3) the existence of any fact which, if established, would constitute a breach of an international obligation; and (4) the nature or extent of the reparation to be made for the breach of an international obligation. By submitting such a declaration, states express a general readiness, unattached to

<sup>2</sup> Statute of the International Court of Justice, adopted on 26 June 1945.

any specific legal issue or dispute, to submit to another state instituting proceedings against it with the ICJ. It follows from the wording of the Statute of the ICJ that this readiness is first and foremost based on reciprocity, as only a state that has itself recognised the compulsory jurisdiction of the ICJ may use it as a means to institute proceedings against another state. The Statute of the ICJ furthermore stipulates that declarations on the recognition of jurisdiction may be made on the condition of reciprocity, or for a certain time.

Currently, 74 countries have submitted declarations recognizing the compulsory jurisdiction of the ICJ, including 23 Member States of the European Union – Latvia among them, having submitted its declaration on 24 September 2019 based on the Law on the Recognition of Jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice adopted on 30 November 2017.<sup>3</sup> Four important aspects need to be highlighted in Latvia's declaration. First, the declaration does not apply to disputes for which the relevant parties have agreed to employ methods that entail a binding outcome, with the term "agreement" meaning agreements that may be made in the future on the settlement of a specific dispute as well as existing treaties that provide a procedure for dispute settlement. For example, the Member States of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which includes Latvia, have agreed that any violation of this Convention shall be examined in the European Court of Human Rights, and therefore, based on the clause included in Latvia's declaration, any claim against Latvia over non-compliance with the Convention could not be brought before the ICJ. Second, in line with national security interests, Latvia's declaration states that it shall not apply to disputes related to the deployment of Latvia's armed forces abroad or the hosting of foreign armed forces in the territory of Latvia. Third, Latvia's declaration contains several criteria to strengthen, as much as possible, Latvia's procedural standing in any possible dispute where Latvia would be the respondent, *inter alia* a reference indicating that the declaration shall apply to disputes arising after the submission of this declaration to the UN, and that it shall not apply to disputes in which the other party has accepted the compulsory jurisdiction of the ICJ only in relation to or for the purpose of the specific dispute. Finally, Latvia's declaration serves to further reinforce the principle of the continuity of statehood that Latvia has consistently upheld, as the declaration states that it replaces the declaration made on behalf of the Latvian government to the Statute of the Permanent Court of International Justice, which came into effect on 26 February 1935.

By recognising the compulsory jurisdiction of the ICJ, a state voluntarily submits to the control mechanism of the International Court of Justice, which is, first and

---

<sup>3</sup> Law on the Recognition of Jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice, adopted on 30.11.2017, published in the official gazette "Latvijas Vēstnesis" issue No. 252 (19.12.2017); Rules of the Cabinet of Ministers "On the Recognition of Jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice", adopted on 27.08.2019, published in the official gazette "Latvijas Vēstnesis" issue No. 117 (30.08.2019).

foremost, an attestation to that state's respect for a rules-based international order, where disputes are resolved in court rather than by use of force; it is an attestation that a state accepts the possibility of being both, an applicant to the court or a respondent. In other words, recognition of the compulsory jurisdiction of the ICJ constitutes a pledge to not only support a rules-based international order in theory, but to also act in accordance with that order and demand the same of others. The more countries that give such a pledge, the stronger the network linking them and the better the collective supervision over compliance with a rules-based international order.

Another way that a state agrees to disputes being resolved in the ICJ is by concluding international bilateral or multilateral treaties that provide for the ICJ as the dispute settlement mechanism for all questions arising from these treaties. There are many such treaties of a great variety in content, so the ICJ is asked to express itself on a broad range of issues pertaining to international law. For example, in November 1979, the United States submitted an application to the ICJ against Iran over the taking of hostages at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran; the application was based on four different international treaties providing for the settlement of disputes in the ICJ: the Optional Protocol to the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations concerning the Compulsory Settlement of Disputes, the Optional Protocol to the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations concerning the Compulsory Settlement of Disputes, the 1955 Treaty of Amity, Economic Relations and Consular Rights between the United States and Iran, and the 1973 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Crimes against Internationally Protected Persons, including Diplomatic Agents.

It should furthermore be noted that the ICJ did not appear out of nowhere. The League of Nations, predecessor to the United Nations, had established a dispute settlement mechanism – the Permanent Court of Justice. Several clauses in the Statute of the ICJ, which is an integral part of the UN Charter and is based on the Statute of the Permanent Court of Justice, essentially provide that the ICJ assumes the duties of the Permanent Court of Justice. Thus, any dispute that may arise over treaties signed prior to World War II which would have been settled by the Permanent Court of Justice of the League of Nations are today examined by the ICJ. For example, in 1976, Greece submitted an application to the ICJ against Türkiye regarding the delimitation of the continental shelf in the Aegean Sea, basing the jurisdiction of the ICJ on the 1928 General Act for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes, Article 17 of which states that disputes regarding the rights of the respective parties shall be submitted for decision to the ICJ. In its application, Greece noted that both Greece and Türkiye signed the General Act in 1931 and 1934 respectively, and that it remained in force at the time of the dispute between the parties. The ICJ, however, rejected this argument by Greece and held that it did not, in fact, have the jurisdiction to settle this dispute. The ICJ found that the case is subject to a derogation

that Greece had submitted when signing the 1928 Act by which it excluded disputes over Greece's territorial status from the jurisdiction of the Permanent Court of Justice, and thus, based on the principle of reciprocity, Greece may not submit a claim against Türkiye regarding its territorial status. Today, the ICJ is examining several

---

By recognising the compulsory jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice, a state voluntarily submits to the control mechanism of the International Court of Justice, which is, first and foremost, an attestation to that state's respect for a rules-based international order, but also a pledge to act in accordance with that order and demand the same of others. The more countries that give such a pledge, the stronger the network linking them and the better the collective supervision over compliance with a rules-based international order.

---

high-profile cases that have come before the Court based on dispute-settlement clauses contained in international treaties. A special mention should be given to the case instituted following the application submitted by Ukraine on 26 February 2022 against Russia regarding the abuse of the United Nations 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (the Genocide Convention).

Latvia is also party to several international treaties providing for the settlement of disputes in the ICJ. For example, with the Declaration on the Accession to International Human Rights Instruments adopted by the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia on 4 May 1990, Latvia recognises as binding many international treaties, including the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination which provides for the settlement of any dispute arising from the Convention by the ICJ.

Finally, a state can express its acceptance that a dispute is brought before the ICJ by explicitly deciding on it. In other words, states may conclude special agreements stipulating that a specific dispute shall be brought before the ICJ. For example, in 1967 the Federal Republic of Germany and Denmark signed the Special Agreement for the submission to the International Court of Justice of a difference between the Kingdom of Denmark and the Federal Republic of Germany concerning the delimitation, as between the Kingdom of Denmark and the Federal Republic of Germany, of the continental shelf in the North

Sea. Similarly, in 1989 the State of Libya (the Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya until 2023) and the Republic of Chad signed the Framework Agreement on the peaceful settlement of the territorial dispute between the Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya and the Republic of Chad, which stipulated that, should

the parties not arrive at a settlement of the dispute within a year, it shall be submitted to the ICJ. Latvia has hitherto not signed any such agreements.

Special agreements on bringing a specific dispute before the ICJ are important for two reasons. First, if the settlement of a dispute through negotiations has proven difficult, then bringing the matter before the ICJ allows the parties to avoid escalating the dispute in their bilateral relations and instead to obtain a judicial settlement formulated by an independent, impartial, internationally legitimate institution. As a result of these special agreements, litigation, which is often seen as indicative of the inability of disputing parties to reach a settlement, becomes demonstration of a constructive approach aimed at finding a fair solution. In Latvia's practice, a special agreement was mentioned unofficially as an option in consultations with Estonia in the 1990s during negotiations over maritime delimitation in the Gulf of Riga, when a compromise had to be sought between the conflicting interests of the fishing industries of both countries. Thanks to efforts by both parties, the negotiations were successfully concluded in 1996 without the need to involve the ICJ. Second, special agreements are the best proof that the ICJ is a viable alternative to armed force. Moreover, the fact that states explicitly agree to use this dispute settlement mechanism significantly reduces the possibility that the solution suggested by the ICJ will be ignored. An excellent example of this is the aforementioned territorial dispute between Libya and Chad, which started out as an armed conflict in the late 1980s. Libyan forces occupied territory in the north of Chad until eventually, due to internal disagreements and international pressures, both states agreed on a ceasefire and the peaceful resolution of the dispute. In 1990, the matter was brought before the ICJ, which issued its judgment in February 1994 recognising Chad's sovereignty over the disputed territory. By May 1994, Libyan forces had withdrawn from the occupied territory under the supervision of the UN.

In other words, existing practice demonstrates that the ICJ is indeed a viable alternative to armed force.

As stated at the beginning of this section, alongside settling disputes between states, the ICJ also issues advisory opinions on legal issues. Pursuant to Article 96 of the UN Charter, the General Assembly or the Security Council may request the International Court of Justice to provide an advisory opinion on any legal question, while other organs of the UN and specialised agencies may request advisory opinions on legal questions arising within the scope of their activities. Since the establishment of the ICJ, it has been requested to provide such opinions on many crucial matters. In 1996, the ICJ responded to a question submitted by the UN General Assembly on the legality of the threat or use of nuclear weapons, finding that such threats or use would contradict international law applicable to armed conflict, in particular the norms and principles of humanitarian law, whilst also emphasising that it cannot reach a definitive conclusion as to the legality or illegality of the use



Kristīne Līce attending the Law Not War: A Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression discussion at the UN in New York, 25 October 2022. Photo from personal archives

of nuclear weapons by a state in an extreme circumstance of self-defence, in which its very survival would be at stake.<sup>4</sup> In turn, in 2024, the ICJ issued a contentiously received opinion on the legal consequences arising from the policies and practices of Israel in occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, in which it recognised Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory as illegal.<sup>5</sup> Currently, the ICJ is working on an opinion in response to a question submitted by the UN General Assembly on the obligations of states in respect of climate change.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Full text of the Advisory Opinion is available on the website of the International Court of Justice: International Court of Justice, "Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons. Advisory Opinion of 8 July 1996", accessed 02.09.2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/95/095-19960708-ADV-01-00-EN.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Full text of the Advisory Opinion is available on the website of the International Court of Justice: International Court of Justice, "Legal consequences arising from the policies and practices of Israel in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem", accessed 02.09.2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/186/186-20240719-adv-01-00-en.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> The latest news and national positions can be found on the website of the International Court of Justice: International Court of Justice, "Obligations of States in respect of Climate Change", accessed 02.09.2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/187>.



As opposed to the legally binding judgments issued by the ICJ in cases involving disputes between states, advisory opinions, as the name suggests, are not binding. Yet advisory opinions are still a useful tool at the disposal of the ICJ, as they allow it to express its position on legal questions. These advisory opinions may be relevant to the interests of many countries, and possibly, indirectly promote the resolution of specific disputes. In its advisory opinions, the ICJ can explain the content of international law, which may, in turn, assist states in understanding their international obligations and avoiding violations. In other words, an advisory opinion of the ICJ can serve as a mechanism to prevent international disputes.

## Shortcomings: Inevitable or Avoidable?

Alongside the benefits it provides, the International Court of Justice is not without its faults. Some of them are characteristic of any organisation that is at the pinnacle of its sector and is therefore expected to take considered, thoroughly justified, and authoritative decisions. This means that processes at the ICJ do not move quickly – they can sometimes take more than 10 years. Nonetheless, the ICJ has demonstrated that, if needed, it can act in the blink of an eye. For example, in the *LeGrand* case, Germany submitted a claim against the United States over a possible violation of the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations. The case involved U.S. authorities failing to inform two German citizens, who had been arrested and later sentenced to death, of their right to contact German consular officials in the United States. The ICJ received Germany's request to indicate provisional measures at 7:30 PM on 2 March 1999, and on 3 March it already issued an order requiring the United States to take all measures at its disposal to ensure that a death sentence was not carried out pending the final decision of the ICJ.<sup>7</sup> In turn, the fact that the number of cases brought before the ICJ is incomparably less than the number examined by the Court of Justice of the European Union or the European Court of Human Rights may be the reason the ICJ has never seen the need to revise its principles for document submission and processing – the ICJ requires the absolute majority of documents to still be submitted in hard copy. However, the length of proceedings, as well as the form of communication, are aspects of work organisation that the ICJ could revise and therefore cannot be considered to be inevitable faults.

On the other hand, there are at least three features of the ICJ that often garner criticism but are closely related to the essence of international law and the institutional structure of the United Nations. The first of these features is the norm con-

---

<sup>7</sup> More information about the case is available on the website of the International Court of Justice: International Court of Justice, “*LaGrand (Germany v. United States of America)*. Overview of the case”, accessed 02.09.2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/104>.

tained in Article 34 of the Statute of the ICJ that only states may be parties in cases before the Court. In other words, neither natural nor legal persons, nor international non-governmental organisations, have the right to submit an application before the ICJ or act as respondents. To a great extent, this approach reflects the fact that only states can be members of the UN – i.e., the organisation that the ICJ is a part of – and that states are still sovereign subjects of international law, whose practice have a meaningful impact on the content of international law. As the role of other subjects of international law, particularly natural persons and international organisations, has significantly increased since the end of World War II, the provisions of the Statute of the ICJ are often criticised for not reflecting the modern world; however, there is little reason to believe that states would be willing to amend the Statute any time soon, as that would mean an opening of the UN Charter as such.

The second feature is related to the previously described way that disputes between states can only be brought before the ICJ if the states have consented to it. This means that not all disputes requiring a solution are, in fact, examined by the ICJ. This feature illustrates one of the main differences between national and international legal systems: while in a national legal system certain institutions will have the authority to employ coercive measures to enforce compliance with behavioural norms and settle disputes, in the international legal system the paramount value is the sovereign equality of states, meaning that no one state has any power over any other state. This means that no country can force another country to appear before the ICJ unless that country has given prior consent. That is why it is crucial that more countries accept the ICJ as a dispute-settling mechanism in the framework of international treaties, and more countries recognise the compulsory jurisdiction of the ICJ.

The third feature of the ICJ is closely linked to the aforementioned principle of the sovereign equality of states. Pursuant to the UN Charter, Member States are obliged to comply with any decision of the ICJ in cases that they are party to. However, there is no mechanism in place to enforce compliance if a state does not do so voluntarily. Even though the UN Charter provides that a state may have recourse to the UN Security Council to ensure that a ruling rendered by the ICJ is given effect, there is always the possibility that a permanent member of the Security Council uses its veto rights to block such a request. A vivid example of this is the fate of the order issued by the ICJ on 16 March 2022 for Russia to suspend the military operations that it commenced on 24 February 2022 in the territory of Ukraine – this order has not been complied with. Yet, I would like to emphasise once more the difference between the will and efficacy of the United Nations, including the International Court of Justice, and the will and readiness of UN Member States to allow the UN to be an effective organisation – the former is impossible without the latter. In other words, for the UN to change, that change must first and foremost take place in the positions of UN Member States. Together with other like-minded countries, Latvia can promote this change by patiently explaining the need to prioritise the international rule of law.

## Latvia's Role

Latvia's relationship with the International Court of Justice can be analysed from two perspectives. First, we may examine whether and how Latvia appears in documents submitted to and drafted by the ICJ. A search of the ICJ website reveals over 100 documents where Latvia is mentioned, including a document that was submitted as part of the very first dispute examined by the ICJ. This document is a 30 July 1948 Reply by the United Kingdom in response to the Counter-Memorial submitted by Albania in the so-called Corfu Channel case, in which the UK brought a case against Albania, holding the latter responsible for explosions of naval mines in the territorial waters of Albania resulting in serious damage to UK warships and killing 44 crew members. To substantiate its argument that under customary international law vessels have the right of passage through the territorial waters of a coastal state, and that Albania therefore has no grounds to accuse British warships of violating its territorial sovereignty, the UK referred to national opinions on the content of international law in this regard. Latvia is given particular mention, because in the questionnaires submitted prior to the 1930 Codification Conference in The Hague, 15 states had indicated that they recognise such rights, while three countries – the United States, Bulgaria and Latvia – had rejected the existence of such rights, although in Latvia's case it seemed to have been understood as the rights of foreign vessels to enter ports or drop anchor in territorial waters rather than cross straits connecting different parts of a sea.<sup>8</sup>

---

Latvia's increasing involvement in the work of the ICJ clearly demonstrates that Latvia does not consider itself merely a consumer of international law. It is ready to shape the content of international law, as well as do its part in protecting the international rule of law.

---

However, it is much more important to look at ICJ cases where Latvia was actually involved. The first of these were 2010 ICJ advisory opinion proceedings on whether Kosovo's declaration of independence was in accordance with international law. On 17 April 2009, Latvia submitted its opinion substantiating why it believed Kosovo's declaration to be in accordance with.<sup>9</sup> The first interstate dispute in which

<sup>8</sup> See International Court of Justice, "The Corfu Channel case. Vol. II. Documents of the written proceedings (cont.)", accessed 02.09.2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/1/10895.pdf>, Paragraph 92.

<sup>9</sup> The national opinions submitted in the case are available on the website of the International Court of Justice: International Court of Justice, "Accordance with international law of the unilateral declaration of independence in respect of Kosovo. Written proceedings", accessed 02.09.2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/141/written-proceedings>.

Latvia participated was the above case instituted by Ukraine on 26 February 2022 against Russia regarding the abuse of the United Nations 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (the Genocide Convention). As a party to the Genocide Convention, Latvia has the right to express an opinion on the interpretation of the Convention. On this basis Latvia was the first of 31 countries who submitted a declaration of intervention to the ICJ in 2022 as a third party.<sup>10</sup> Finally, in 2024 Latvia also submitted an opinion in the framework of an advisory opinion on the obligations of states in respect of climate change.<sup>11</sup> Latvia's increasing involvement in the work of the ICJ clearly demonstrates that Latvia does not merely consider itself a consumer of international law. It is ready to shape the content of international law, as well as do its part in protecting the international rule of law.

## Fear not the future

The main difference between the era when the ICJ was created and the early 21st century is the multitude of global and regional mechanisms available. These include *ad hoc* and specialised mechanisms that have been established since World War II that states can now employ to settle disputes, such as the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, the dispute-settlement mechanism of the World Trade Organisation, the Court of Justice of the European Union, and various arbitral tribunals under international bilateral treaties. Another aspect which sets these two eras apart is that alongside mechanisms for settling disputes between states, several international courts and tribunals have also been established for the examination of individual responsibility for the gravest international crimes.

For example, on 25 May 1993 the UN Security Council adopted a decision to establish the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, which was the first specialised tribunal on which a judge from Latvia (Uldis Ķinišs) served as an *ad litem* judge. The creation of the International Criminal Court also deserves special mention. Established in 2002, it is the first permanent criminal court at the international level, and Latvian judge Anita Ušacka was among the first judges elected to serve on the Court in 2003. The need to ensure individual accountability for international crimes, including crimes of aggression, which are said to be the source of other most serious crimes of international concern, is of particular importance after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia is not a member of the International Criminal Court, and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court prevents

---

<sup>10</sup> The national opinions submitted in the case are available on the website of the International Court of Justice: International Court of Justice, "Allegations of Genocide under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Ukraine v. Russian Federation) – Intervention. Written proceedings", accessed 02.09.2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/182/intervention>

<sup>11</sup> *Supra* 6.

it from exercising jurisdiction over crime of aggression when committed by nationals or on the territory of a state that has not ratified the Statute. Therefore, since the very first days of Russia's invasion, there have been discussions over the need to set up a special tribunal for Russia's crime of aggression against Ukraine, which would be another addition to the constellation of international mechanisms already in existence.

The multitude of dispute-settlement mechanisms is both a challenge and an opportunity. While it can fragment and even juxtapose interpretations of international law, these mechanisms can also supplement one another to cover previously untouched areas. The International Court of Justice, often referred to as the "World Court", has in no way lost its meaning or authority. On the contrary, it is the uniting and leading institution in interpreting and developing international law, because no other mechanism has such broad scope and membership or such extensive possibilities to create judicial dialogue. With the support of its members, including Latvia, the ICJ can help fulfil the commitment made by the founders of the United Nations: "Never again!".

Jānis Kārklīņš

## **Latvia at the UN in Geneva**

### **In Place of an Introduction**

When in 2000 I was appointed as Latvia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Office at Geneva and the specialised agencies of the UN, I asked a colleague who had personal experience in bilateral and multilateral diplomacy for his opinion. The answer he gave me came as a surprise: bilateral diplomacy is constructive (shaping bilateral relations), multilateral diplomacy is destructive (observing and analysing the situation and trying to "kill" any ideas that are not aligned with your national interests).

Having accumulated 23 years of experience in multilateral diplomacy, I can say that this assertion, while not entirely incorrect, is certainly not the only way to describe multilateral diplomacy. I would add that, under normal circumstances, multilateral diplomacy is a "parade of nations" where each state, and small states in particular, try to offer their expertise on issues that are on the agendas of international organisations. The advantage that small states often have is that no one suspects them of advocating for or protecting some vested interest. As a result, the majority of intergovernmental processes at the UN are headed by representatives of small states.

### **What Is the United Nations and What Is the Role of the UN Office at Geneva?**

The United Nations is an international organisation with a universal nature – it was created in 1945, at the end of World War II, for the purpose of guaranteeing global peace and security, promoting cooperation among states, solving economic, social and humanitarian challenges, and promoting respect for human rights around the world. The UN is considered as the successor to the League of Nations, which ceased to exist in April of 1946. The headquarters of the UN is located in New York (US), but there are also several regional centres, one of which is the United Nations

Office at Geneva (UNOG), where it is housed in the building formerly occupied by the League of Nations.

Geneva is special in that it is home to many of the specialised agencies and structural units of the UN. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), as well as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are located here. Geneva is also home to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). Furthermore, Geneva hosts the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the World Health Organisation (WHO), the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO), and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Geneva is also the centre for disarmament and arms control. The UN Conference on Disarmament (CD) and the secretariats for several conventions (the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) and the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT)) are also located here. Other important organisations outside of the UN system that are also based in Geneva include the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

In Geneva, the work never stops, except for the week between Christmas and New Year's. Some countries have three diplomatic missions in Geneva (UNOG, WTO and CD), whereas Latvia has one, consisting of five diplomats who take part in the work of all of the aforementioned organisations. An extensive array of issues is covered in Geneva: security and arms control, human rights and humanitarian issues, and economic and social development, as well as health and environmental protection, trade, and technological development. The majority of the work done in Geneva is reflected in decisions adopted by the UN General Assembly. Latvia joined the United Nations on 17 September 1991 and opened its mission in Geneva already in 1992. Our first ambassador to the UN in Geneva was Ms Sandra Kalniete. The author of this essay represented Latvia in Geneva from 2000 until 2007, and from 2015 until 2020, and has been involved in many of the initiatives that will be described later herein.

## **Latvia's Activity Within the Bodies of the UN Over the Course of the Last 25 Years**

Latvia's greatest achievement at the UN in Geneva might well have been in 2004–2005 when during my tenure as Ambassador, I was elected as Chair of the Preparatory Committee of the Tunis Phase (2005) of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). I had previously served as the Vice-Chair of the Preparatory Committee of the Geneva Phase (2003). The Chair of the Committee essentially leads the negotiations on all substantive issues on the Summit agenda. The Summit

was organised under the auspices of the International Telecommunication Union, and it was held in two phases: in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunisia in 2005. The main issue discussed in the first phase of the Summit was bridging the digital divide. A special working group was set up to facilitate dialogue regarding internet governance principles.

The main issue during the Tunis phase was endorsing the internet governance model based on multi-stakeholder participation involving representatives of governments, technical communities, internet industries, civil society, and internet users. Some states argued in favour of an intergovernmental internet governance model that would allow governments to not only regulate the technical development of the internet but also control information flows online.

At the beginning of this century, critical internet infrastructure was subject to the self-regulation and self-governance of the internet industry and technical community in the United States, which was, in turn, supervised by – and its development targets approved by – the U.S. Department of Commerce. Self-regulation and self-governance were implemented through the collaboration of various organisations involved in ensuring the functioning of the internet. This was, in essence, a multi-stakeholder governance model with government oversight. Many countries, the European Union included, believed that internet governance ought to be internationalised without losing the multi-stakeholder aspect of it. After intense debate, a compromise was finally achieved that would affirm the principles of multi-stakeholder governance whilst also being acceptable to the states that insisted on an intergovernmental governance model at a global level, as the UN Secretary-General was called upon to launch a discussion on the future role of governments in internet governance. This was a key decision elaborated by the Preparatory Committee under Latvia's chairmanship, and it has guaranteed the unhindered development of the internet globally for two decades. At the start of the negotiations, some countries insisted on the wording "invite the UN Secretary-General to commence enhanced cooperation". The main objective was to replace oversight of the technical resources of the internet by the U.S. government with oversight by a group of a dozen countries. As a result of lengthy and complicated negotiations, it was agreed to word the request as follows: "the process towards enhanced cooperation, to be started by the UN Secretary-General [...]". To be fair, it must be noted, however, that following the adoption of this wording, which is a classic example of "constructive ambiguity", the UN has spent millions on meetings trying to understand whether the Secretary-General has or has not fulfilled this task established by the Summit. While in reality the transition from U.S. government oversight of internet resources to multi-stakeholder governance took place nine years ago, the issue remains a bone of contention at the United Nations.

The UN began the practice of holding world summits in 1992 with the first summit on sustainable development. These are huge events with thousands of participants, including heads of state and government, from around the world. The



summits are usually organised by a preparatory committee, which negotiates all the final documents to ensure that the summit becomes a meaningful communication event on the relevant topic. Negotiations will often only be concluded on the night before the summit starts. The WSIS was no exception. I had the honour of announcing that a compromise had been reached at a quarter to midnight. The intensity of the negotiations is excellently summed up by the fact that this was the first and only time when, as the Ambassador of Latvia, I had to decline a meeting with President of Latvia Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, who had come to Tunis to attend the summit, because I was simply too busy.

Chairing the Preparatory Committee of the WSIS Tunis phase ensured Latvia's continued involvement in digital diplomacy processes within the UN. One of the outcomes of the Summit was the creation of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) under the supervision of the UN Secretary-General. It was (and still is) a forum for discussion where parties meet once a year to discuss any and all issues related to internet governance so that decision-makers from various organisations and representative groups may better grasp the complexity of issues, enabling their organisations to take well-informed decisions. For more than 20 years already, representatives of governments, international organisations, the internet industry, the technical community, civil society and internet users have been taking part in the work of the IGF. The UN Secretary-General holds each session of the IGF in a different country from a different continent, but they are all prepared by the Multi-stakeholder Advisory Group (MAG). After the WSIS in Tunis, Latvia was part of the MAG for five years, and it headed the group in 2014 and 2015. One of the greatest achievements of the IGF is the part it played in ending the unilateral governance of critical internet infrastructure. Years of discussions at the IGF about reducing the role of the U.S. government resulted in a change of U.S. policy and the termination of contractual relations with the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), a California-based non-profit that coordinates the functioning of the domain name system. Basically, as of 2015, global critical internet resources are governed based on the principles of multi-stakeholder participation, whereby the U.S. government can affect ICANN decisions only within the Government Advisory Committee (GAC) in accordance with the same rules as the governments of any other country. Thanks to Latvia's leadership of the WSIS, our representative chaired the ICANN GAC from 2007 until 2010.

---

Under normal circumstances, multilateral diplomacy is a "parade of nations" where each state, and small states in particular, try to offer their expertise on issues that are on the agendas of international organisations.

---



The opening of the UN World Summit on the Information Society in Tunis, Tunisia on 16 November 2005. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan (third from the left) and Jānis Kārklīšs (second from the left) listening to interventions by delegates. Photo: UN Photo/Mark Garten

In 2007, Latvia joined the UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD), which is a functional commission of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The final documents of the WSIS appointed this Commission as the forum for assuring follow-up to Summit decisions. The CSTD regularly analyses information about the work done by organisations within the UN system to implement the decisions taken at the Summit, and it also lays out the work to be done during the subsequent reporting period. The CSTD also took part in the organisation of the 10-year review session of the WSIS process at the UN General Assembly. Latvia has been a member of the CSTD for two decades already, and as such it has contributed to the shaping of the global digital future.

Politically, the most influential organisation in Geneva is the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, which supports the work of the Human Rights Council (HRC). The HRC was created in 2006 on the basis of the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) to increase the role of human rights in the work of the UN system and to promote the protection and evolution of human rights throughout the world. The General Assembly elects 47 states from different regional groups to sit on the Council. While the CHR met for a 6-week session once a year, the HRC works for at least 16 weeks per year, convening for three Council sessions (spring, summer and

autumn) and three sessions of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Working Group. The Universal Periodic Review was established together with the HCR itself to perform a review once every five years of the human rights situation in each UN Member State, thus depoliticising discussions over human rights in various countries of the world. The idea has not been implemented in full, as major human rights issues in certain countries are still discussed in the HRC.

Latvia has been a member of the UN Commission on Human Rights (1999–2001) and the Human Rights Council (2015–2017). In 2016, Latvia served as vice-chair of the HRC and sat on the Bureau of the HRC, which consists of the President and four Vice-Presidents from each regional group. The Bureau is responsible for the procedural and organisational work of the Council. In 2016, Latvia led the drafting of proposals on HRC work efficiency, which are still being adhered to today. In 2004, upon the recommendation of the Latvian delegation, the procedure for the election of the President of the HRC was modified. As a result, the President is elected at the beginning of the year rather than on the first day of the HRC session, thus allowing the newly elected President to plan and better prepare for chairing the session.

In 2003, the Latvian delegation to the UNHRC presented an initiative to issue standing invitations to all UN human rights mechanisms (special and thematic rapporteurs, as well as independent human rights experts). The aim of this initiative was to promote cooperation with human rights mechanisms and to try to influence states that do not cooperate with them or do so poorly. The initiative was initially supported by approximately 40 countries, but 10 years on the number of supporters has reached 110. It is promoted based on a resolution of the UN General Assembly, which the Latvian delegation in New York regularly places on the agenda to this day.

In 2001, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees organised a ministerial-level conference to mark the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the UN Refugee Convention in 1951. Upon the recommendation of the Latvian delegation, President of Latvia Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga was invited to give a key-note address at the conference, as she herself had been a refugee along with the rest of her family during World War II. Following the President's emotional address, in which she shared her memories of being a refugee in Morocco and urged all states to empathise with the needs of refugees and uphold global standards for the protection of refugees as laid down in the 1951 Convention, the venue erupted in applause. Never again have I experienced anything like that in my 24 years in multilateral diplomacy. When we happened to meet 20 years later, one of the organisers of the conference still remembered this speech with a wave of emotion.

In 2016, Latvia was elected as Vice-President of the General Assembly of the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO). When the President of the Assembly left their post and the other Vice-President waived the opportunity to chair the Assembly, the Latvian Ambassador became the Chair of the Assembly. The WIPO is a specialised agency of the United Nations that ensures the protection and

development of intellectual property rights throughout the world. The main issues in 2016–2017 were convening a diplomatic conference for the drafting of a treaty on design law, improving the intergovernmental process in the preparation of assemblies, and expanding the network of WIPO representations in various countries of the world. The main topic discussed when negotiating the design law treaty was the granting of derogations for developing countries. Last-minute talks about possible compromise wording in the draft convention were still being held under the leadership of the President on the eve of the assembly. These negotiations did not end in success, but Latvia's name had been visible to all delegations.

In preparing the work of the WIPO Assembly, Latvia also led negotiations on expanding the WIPO network of offices around the world. Competition among Member States was stiff, and a compromise needed to be found balancing the various competing interests. Even though the President was unable to produce an agreement on all aspects of the decision, a provisional agreement was reached on opening two WIPO offices in Africa (in Algeria and Nigeria). The core function assigned to them was developing the culture of intellectual property protection on the African continent. The sensitivity of the issue lay in the fact that when the office of an international organisation is opened in a country, it is impossible to shut it down without serious political consequences to the organisation. Therefore, decisions on the presence of the organisation in various regions of the world need to be carefully considered and flawless.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) is a specialised agency of the UN working on the protection and promotion of social and labour rights, as well as the elaboration of international labour standards. A unique feature of the ILO is its tri-lateral cooperation model. All ILO decisions, including conventions, must be approved by governments, employers and trade unions at the International Labour Conference (ILC). In 2015, Ieva Jaunzeme, State Secretary of the Ministry of Welfare of Latvia, became the President of the 104th Session of the ILC. Thus, Latvia gained excellent visibility in the organisation. The ILC hosted an informal ministerial meeting in Latvia to expand the outreach and impact of occupa-

---

These negotiations did not end in success, but Latvia's name had been visible to all delegations.

---

tional safety and health standards in micro and small enterprises. The meeting was chaired by Uldis Augulis, Minister of Welfare, and alongside ILO Member States, it was also attended by Guy Ryder, Director-General of the ILO, Marianne Thyssen, European Commissioner, and various social partners. The event was an opportunity to present Latvia's experience in promoting small- and medium-sized business development while fully controlling compliance with occupational safety and health standards.



**Jānis Kārklīšs, Permanent Representative of Latvia to the UN and Chair of the Preparatory Committee of the Tunis Phase of the World Summit on the Information Society, meeting with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, 11 October 2005, Geneva, Switzerland.** Photo: UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

Geneva is also home to the World Health Organisation (WHO). The WHO is a specialised agency of the UN that develops world health standards, ensures national-level safety regarding health matters, and promotes international cooperation and the exchange of information. The main decision-making body of the WHO is the World Health Assembly, which convenes once a year, while in the interim decisions are taken by the Board, which consists of 34 country representatives elected for a term of three years. From 2006 until 2008, Latvian expert Viktors Jaksons was on the Board, and in 2007 he served as Vice-Chair of the Board.

In 1964, the UN General Assembly adopted a decision on the creation of a subordinated intergovernmental organisation – UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD) – which would deal with trade and development issues, particularly in developing countries. The headquarters of UNCTAD is located in Geneva. In 2022, at its 69th session, the Trade and Development Board confirmed Bahitjors Hasans, Latvian Ambassador to the UN in Geneva, as Chair of the Board for a term of one year.

The UN has five regional economic commissions. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) is located in Geneva. It serves as a pan-European platform for discussing economic issues, whilst also being an important forum for the development of standards in various economic sectors. For

example, the majority of global car-building standards are elaborated by the UNECE. The decision-making body of the organisation is the Bureau, which convenes once a month. From 2017 until 2019, the UNECE Bureau was chaired by Latvia, represented by the author of this essay.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) was created after World War II to help countries manage migrant flows. Until 2019, it was an intergovernmental organisation outside of the UN system. With migration issues becoming increasingly topical in international relations, the Member States of the IOM took a decision to integrate the organisation into the United Nations. The IOM consists of 175 Member States. The main decision-making body of the organisation is its Council ("Executive Committee" until 2013). In 2004, the Latvian Ambassador to Geneva chaired the IOM.

Latvia has been actively involved in various arms control processes. Being part of the Eastern Europe regional election group, the members of which are not especially active in regard to leading UN processes, Latvia has had the chance to prove itself in this area. In this century, Latvian ambassadors to Geneva have chaired meetings of the Member States of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) as well as its second amended protocol on land mines. At the beginning of the century, a group of governmental experts (GGE) for the regulation of use of cluster munitions was set up in the framework of the CCW. The use of cluster munitions results in lasting negative humanitarian consequences, because not all explosive devices contained in this type of munition would detonate when the bomb is dropped. Civilians, especially children, often become victims of these unexploded ordnances even long after the end of the armed conflict itself. The International Committee of the Red Cross has demanded that the use of this type of munition would be banned. Military and humanitarian experts on the GGE discussed the technical parameters of submunitions that would ensure the eventual self-neutralisation of unexploded ordnances. Latvia took over the leadership of the GGE in 2007. While at the end of our Presidency, we were forced to admit that the positions of cluster munitions manufacturers and the countries using them were irreconcilable with the positions of those countries that wished to ban the use of these munitions; this failure of the GGE, in turn, led to the issue being separated from the CCW process and the Convention on Cluster Munitions being signed at a conference in Oslo in 2008. That same year, the European Parliament adopted a resolution urging all Member States of the European Union to become parties to the Oslo Convention. Currently, 112 countries have become parties to the Convention, including Lithuania.

In 2018, the CCW began discussions on the regulation of lethal autonomous weapons (LAWS). A group of Member State experts was established to prepare for negotiations over the possible drafting of an additional protocol to the Convention. This working group discussed the theoretical aspects of LAWS and sought common

ground between various positions regarding the definition of weapon autonomy that would form the basis of the scope of the protocol. The rapid development of artificial intelligence over the course of the past 10 years has given rise to concerns from many humanitarian and non-governmental organisations about its military application. Several of these organisations united together to form the Stop Killer Robots coalition, which actively advocates for prohibition of the use of LAWS. Member State military experts in the working group analysed use of lethal weapons from a military, humanitarian and legal perspective. Some countries argued that full autonomy in weapons systems has not yet been achieved, and that therefore, the process ought to be abandoned. It was the chairperson's duty to find a way to continue the exploratory discussions with the aim of approximating the positions of experts from different countries. Whereas the first chair of the GGE (the Indian Ambassador to the Conference on Disarmament) proposed to work on the wording of LAWS usage principles, the Latvian Presidency in 2020 urged Member States to submit comments on how they envision the practical application of the 10 approved principles. At a time when countries had differing opinions on the need for an additional protocol, this approach allowed the Presidency to sum up all the comments and prepare the ground for drafting the text of the possible additional protocol. The main tools in multilateral diplomacy are patience and unconventional moves that allow to approach the desired outcome without crossing any red lines put down by key players.

---

The main tools in multilateral diplomacy are patience and unconventional moves that allow to approach the desired outcome without crossing any red lines put down by key players.

---

In 2019, Latvia chaired the annual Conference of States Parties to the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). Having been ratified by 50 countries around the world, the ATT came into force on 24 December 2014, and it aims to regulate the international trade of conventional weapons and limit illegal arms trade around the world. The goals of the Latvian Presidency were to achieve the number of states parties to the ATT reaching 100 and to foster in-depth discussion of the impact that illegal arms trade has on different genders, as well as the matter of sexual violence in armed conflict and the consequences thereof. President of Latvia Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga spoke at the Conference of States Parties to the ATT in August 2019, emphasising the impact of the illegal arms trade on both genders, although the manifestation of this impact can vary.

## In Place of a Conclusion

Looking back at the past 25 years at the UN in Geneva, Latvia's balance-sheet is quite impressive. It would probably be easier to list the UN specialised agencies and intergovernmental processes that Latvia has not chaired during this time. The activity of Latvia's ambassadors and diplomats has ensured the visibility of and built the reputation of the Latvian delegation. And all the aforementioned simply goes to prove my initial assertion that multilateral diplomacy is a "parade of nations" where everyone does everything they can to put their best foot forward. Latvia has succeeded in doing so at Geneva.



V

**LATVIA'S  
CONTRIBUTION TO  
MULTILATERALISM:  
GLOBAL  
DEVELOPMENT,  
THE PROTECTION  
OF HUMAN RIGHTS,  
AND PARTICIPATION  
IN INTERNATIONAL  
MISSIONS**

# Human Rights Are the Answer to Grand Challenges

Interview with Ilze Brands-Kehris

**Ilze Brands-Kehris**, human rights expert, former Director of the Office of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (2011–2014), currently Assistant Secretary-General of the UN for Human Rights, spoke with Kristīne Līce, Legislation and International Law Adviser to the President of Latvia.

**This publication is dedicated to the work of Latvian experts and Latvian professionals within the United Nations (UN) system. Your experience in this regard is unique, as you have been elected to the UN Human Rights Committee as the candidate nominated by Latvia, and since January 2020 you have been Assistant Secretary-General of the UN for Human Rights and also Head of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in New York. What has your path to the UN been like? What has shaped your knowledge and experience in the area of human rights?**

I actually began working with human rights in Latvia. When I initially came to Latvia in 1991 with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sweden, I had planned to work in political science, as I had specialised in the study of foreign affairs. At that time, Latvia was working on strengthening its newly restored democracy, and it quickly became evident that the democratisation of the state is impossible without human rights. My motivation to focus on the human rights aspect was quite simple really: I wanted to understand how human rights help improve real life. I have abided by this approach throughout my professional career, including at the Council of Europe (CoE), the Organisation for Security and Development in Europe (OSCE), and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Ilze Brands-Kehris served as a Member of the Executive Board of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia from 2003 to 2007 (and as Chair of the Board from 2004 to 2007); from 2006 to 2012 she was an expert and First Vice-President of the Advisory Committee on the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities; from 2007 to 2012 she was Member and Chair (2010–2012) of the Management Board of the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency; and from 2011 to 2014 she was Director of the Office of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities.

While working in regional organisations, I began focusing more and more on the interaction between global and regional processes. Curiosity drove me to study the historic UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which demonstrates the folly of the claim that human rights are a concept imposed on the world by the West. On the contrary, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by countries representing a great variety of cultures.<sup>2</sup>

In 2017, I was the first expert from Latvia to be elected to a UN treaty body – the UN Human Rights Committee, which monitors the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Latvia was involved in the election campaign as a state, and the campaign was coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In collaboration with Ambassador Jānis Mažeiks and diplomat Agnese Vilde from Latvia's Permanent Mission to the UN in New York, meetings were arranged for me with nearly all UN Member States so that they could get to know me as a candidate. As a result, I moved from regional organisations to a global one.

I had already worked with the UN before, but being elected to the UN Human Rights Committee gave me a chance to see how the organisation functioned from the inside. I enjoyed the independence given to experts in speaking with countries about human rights issues, which are often sensitive. The UN Human Rights Committee consists of experts with very different opinions and with backgrounds in different legal systems; therefore, my previous experience in regional organisations proved very useful in arriving at a shared understanding of matters. However, I also had to assess how much I could refer to the CoE or OSCE approaches at a global level.

**How did you come to apply for the position of UN Assistant Secretary-General? What was the recruitment process like?**

I hadn't even noticed that the vacancy had been announced. My colleagues told me and said that I should apply [*laughs*]. I knew the previous Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights<sup>3</sup>, and it seemed to me to be the perfect job – based in New York, which is where all UN Member States are represented and which is therefore home to the most important political processes, and getting to represent the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. It is a job that combines political analysis and work with human rights.

The post of Assistant Secretary-General ranks high in the UN system, so many assume that the selection process is dominated by political considerations and the

---

<sup>2</sup> On 10 December 1948 the UN General Assembly resolution, which included the text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, was adopted with 48 out of the 58 UN Member States at that time voting in favour, including countries from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Eight countries, the USSR among them, abstained. There were no votes against it.

<sup>3</sup> The position of UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights was established in 2010. Ilze Brands-Kehris is the third person to serve in the position.



**Ilze Brands-Kehris addressing the UN General Assembly at a session dedicated to the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 21 March 2023.** Photo: UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

need to ensure a geopolitical balance. But that is not the case. Traditionally, the Under-Secretary-General posts are filled by representatives from the states that are permanent members of the UN Security Council; for example, the Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations is from France and the Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs is from China. However, the post of Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights was “kept away from politics”.

I don’t know how many applications for the job were submitted, but there were quite a lot. As a candidate, I was interviewed by the selection committee, which included the Under-Secretary-General. Based on the interview, it was obvious that the main thing the committee was looking at was the candidate’s approach to sensitive human rights issues. The UN is not a non-governmental organisation, and therefore, it needs to be able to foster dialogue and act diplomatically whilst still upholding all of its principles. Thus, the candidates were assessed on how they would represent the United Nations. There are plenty of countries where the UN is not allowed to have “feet on the ground” – where UN experts are prohibited from entering the country or are not permitted to visit certain regions of the country. What can you do in that case? Of course, non-governmental organisations want the UN to be louder, but

there is also “silent diplomacy”. This is an approach that was extensively used by former OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (2007–2013) Knut Vollebæk, with whom I had worked.

**Please describe a typical work day for you. What do you spend most of your time on? Do you often go on business trips?**

It is difficult to describe what a typical day boils down to. One thing is for sure, though: we definitely work much more than eight hours a day. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has offices in more than 100 countries, and it is represented in New York because that is where the majority of UN political life takes place. Nearly all UN Member States have missions in New York, and this is where all the key issues are debated. Human rights need to go hand-in-hand with political and economic affairs, as well as with thematic processes such as development cooperation, which are all coordinated out of New York.

The majority of our daily work is focused on current and emerging crisis situations. At the moment, that means Gaza, the West Bank, and the occupied Palestinian territories. I have presented reports to the UN Security Council, where these issues are being discussed.<sup>4</sup> Ukraine is also a constant priority. We have a good office in Ukraine, and we receive quality information [from them]. We are also involved in the implementation of Security Council mandates, many of which contain a human rights component alongside security and peace issues. The main focus is on crisis resolution, where we use the approach I mentioned in the beginning: that human rights are an integral part of the solution. That was the case in Mali, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Many business trips are tough. You can read the news and see images on your screen, but being there in person is an entirely different experience, because only then does it really hit home how difficult the situation is, how different people are. I witness poverty, and I meet victims of violence and refugees. It is sometimes difficult to fathom how people keep going. I can only marvel at their will to live. Every time, it reminds me of why I do this job, and it is my motivation to continue, because that is simply what I need to do.

My team also serves as a channel of communication. Many people working at Member State missions to the UN in New York have a direct line to influential institutions in their countries. I have personally talked with representatives of some countries to urge them to, for instance, grant stays of execution because death penalties are still being handed down even to people who were minors at the time of their crime. From New York, I can help a person even on a distant continent. Good contacts and communication can have a very real impact on the situation, as all countries care about their international reputation. Non-governmental organisations

---

<sup>4</sup> This interview took place in late June 2024.

adamantly object if individuals from countries that are considered to be in breach of human rights are appointed to leadership roles in UN human rights bodies, such as the Chair of the UN Human Rights Council. However, we must keep in mind that the decision to nominate a candidate for such a position shows that the country is making a commitment to human rights. It is not ignoring Geneva, where the UN human rights bodies are concentrated, but making certain pledges of what it intends to do to improve human rights and review its legislation. All of this can truly change the situation in that country.

**One of the founding principles of the United Nations is the commitment “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights”. What is your opinion – has the UN succeeded in this commitment? Can it ever be considered as fulfilled since respecting and protecting human rights is a never-ending process?**

In 2020, the UN celebrated its 75th anniversary. A survey was done to assess how the UN was perceived, and the majority of respondents, including youths, indicated the advancement of human rights as the main contribution and key global role of the UN.

---

Just like democracy, human rights is a process – there is no utopia. More and more conflicts are arising around the world, but much less so in places where human rights are respected.

---

Just like democracy, human rights is a process – there is no utopia. More and more conflicts are arising around the world, but much less so in places where human rights are respected. The goal is to ensure access to all human rights, including social, economic, and cultural rights. Opinions vary on the right to development: what does this right actually entail? New rights are also emerging, such as the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.

Human rights are one of the three main pillars of the UN system, the others being peace and security, and development. Yet human rights has the least resources, as it is the “youngest sibling” of the other pillars. The majority of UN resources are allocated to peacekeeping.

The Summit of the Future<sup>5</sup> is scheduled for September 2024, which is set to adopt the Pact for the Future, with five chapters. Human rights and gender equality are horizontal themes throughout all the chapters. But they must also be viewed as separate issues in their own right, requiring strategic assurances that the United Nations genuinely abides by the principle that human rights are at the core of everything the organisation does. That is precisely why my team is also involved

---

<sup>5</sup> More information about the Summit of the Future available on the website of the UN: <https://www.un.org/en/summit-of-the-future>.



Ilze Brands-Kehris visiting Mali in March 2021. Photo: UN Photo

in the areas of security and development – to strengthen the human-rights based approach. To achieve peace, human rights are intertwined in all stages, from peacebuilding to development. This presents new human rights challenges because inequality and failure to respect social rights will not lead to sustainable growth. We work very hard to understand and implement the commitment of the UN.

But human rights are more than just a framework; they are also an outcome, and to be honest, they are also the answer to grand challenges. We are already talking about a human rights economy, where economic policy decisions are viewed through the lens of human rights to ascertain the impact these decisions have on human rights – on people. Likewise, we have human rights budgeting, which requires data and analysis on human rights impacts. The COVID-19 pandemic was a reminder that complex issues cannot be solved with isolated solutions – solutions need to be sought beyond the regional level. The same goes for climate change and pollution. As a global organisation, the United Nations is an appropriate forum for this.

How can human rights contribute? By providing early warnings about emerging crises. Human rights violations indicate tensions and the potential for conflict. During pre-election periods, (in 2024 many countries prepared for elections), human rights issues become aggravated, and that can serve as an indication of an emerging crisis.

Discussions over reforming the UN have intensified lately, yet the issue is still very slow-moving. With regards the effectiveness of the UN, I would like to stress that there is a difference between the United Nations as body composed of its Member

States and the United Nations as an institution [comprised of] the Secretary-General and the various UN agencies. The UN Security Council receives considerable criticism; as one of the main bodies of the UN, composed of representatives of 15 Member States, it has been blamed for its failure to react appropriately to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, while the UN Secretary-General reacted to the invasion very harshly, calling it a violation of the UN Charter. Such a reaction is rare. In turn, many people simply do not see and are not aware of the work done by UN agencies, even though this work is immensely important.

Coming back to the subject of Ukraine, we have submitted several reports about the situation there, as we have a monitoring mission on the ground. The information provided by the UN is highly reliable, as it is verified using a pre-defined methodology. Of course, it is more difficult to assess the situation in the occupied territories of Ukraine because Russia does not allow UN experts access to these areas, but we are continuing to talk to people and to collect and verify information. The UN plays a huge role not only in the political process but also in the collection and verification of information. In Ukraine, we are documenting human rights violations, and this information will be crucial in establishing accountability – it can be used in legal proceedings both internationally and in individual countries that are investigating the crimes against Ukraine based on universal jurisdiction.

**Do you feel that universal human rights are currently gaining ground, or quite the opposite – are they becoming regional and relative?**

This is a crucial question: are human rights universal or regional? There has always been a certain duality in how countries see this: on the one hand, they understand the universality of human rights, but at the same time, there is an emphasis on each country's complicated past. The idea that a certain country's human rights are specific to their history and cultural characteristics has not been prevalent for the past 20 years, but today this misguided approach is resurfacing.. Naturally, no country will ever actually say that it rejects human rights. Instead, they try to prove that their history and culture justify adapting the content of human rights and the country's obligation to protect them. This approach is especially evident in discussions on the right to development and on LGBT rights, and these tensions lead to the argument of cultural relativism. But it is important to reiterate how wrong it is to go against universal values. The history and culture of a country has a role to play, but in no way rescinds human rights.

In December of 2023 at a meeting in Geneva, more than 150 different pledges regarding human rights were made by different countries. I think this proves that they are well aware of the universality of human rights. Furthermore, this attests to the need to be active in all regions. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights in Latin America is very progressive on a number of issues – for example, the right to a clean environment. Europe could learn a thing or two from this. In turn, the



African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights has great standing in Africa; compliance with the Charter is monitored by the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights. My team is working closely with the African Union, and we are implementing various projects on respecting human rights within peacekeeping measures. For instance, in the Sahel region, such projects were started five years ago to analyse impacts on human rights alongside military measures in peacekeeping. This is all based on the belief that universal values can be reinforced.

**The United Nations was the first global international organisation that Latvia joined after the restoration of independence – on 17 September 1991. How do you see the interaction between Latvia and the UN in regard to human rights?**

I think it was crucial that Latvia joined the UN and all of the most important UN human rights conventions right away. Likewise, constructive dialogue with UN bodies is important. Dialogue can be scaled up or down, but Latvia's openness to dialogue has lent it political credibility. The question of minority rights is no longer as prominent, and considerable progress has been achieved on respecting human rights in closed facilities (prisons and psychiatric hospitals). At the same time it must be kept in mind that Latvia is a part of Europe, and Europe is assessed in a global perspective. The key areas that this assessment looks at from a human rights perspective are migration and how the human rights of asylum seekers are respected, including in situations where there are hybrid attacks. I have to say that from a global perspective, Europe does not look good. In other regions, countries lying adjacent to crisis points have taken in many more refugees fleeing Sudan, the Middle East, and Venezuela.

---

I think it was crucial that Latvia joined the UN and all of the most important UN human rights conventions right away.

---

**What role could Latvia play in shaping the future of human rights?**

Latvia has the opportunity to be creative in human rights at a global level. Institutionally, we could think about establishing the post of a human rights ambassador, while content-wise Latvia could actively advocate for a human rights-based approach in addressing the topical issues of the day: technological development, artificial intelligence, and climate change. New areas are also emerging that will inevitably affect human rights, such as neurotechnology and space exploration. Forecasting and discussing the opportunities which future generations will face has become increasingly relevant. What are the rights of the unborn? Naturally, we have to prioritise, but there are areas where Latvia can contribute a lot, while emphasising the need to uphold human rights principles. This will certainly strengthen Latvia's image internationally. Latvia can be a leader!

Alise Balode

## Latvia's Development Cooperation Policy

In 2024, we are marking the 20th anniversary of Latvia's development cooperation policy and accession to the European Union (EU) and the 25th anniversary of Latvia moving from being a recipient to being a donor country.

Development cooperation policy is one of the pillars of the EU's external action, and it plays a role in the work towards the common foreign policy targets laid down in Article 21 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU). Development cooperation policy also helps reinforce democracy, [support] the rule of law and human rights, keep the peace and prevent conflict, and improve environmental conditions and the sustainable management of the world's natural resources; it helps people, countries and regions affected by natural or man-made disasters and facilitates the functioning of an international system based on closer multilateral cooperation and good governance at a global level.

Article 4 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) grants the EU competence to carry out activities and conduct a common policy in the area of development cooperation. At the same time, EU Member States can also exercise their own competence in this area.

Pursuant to Article 208 of the TFEU, the development cooperation policy shall have as its primary objective the reduction and, in the long term, the eradication of poverty. Article 208 also requires the EU and all of its Member States to comply with the commitments they have approved in the context of the United Nations (UN) and other competent international organisations.

Thus, development cooperation is part of the *acquis communautaire*, which, upon acceding to the Union, Latvia had to transpose and comply with, just as any other Member State.

For this reason, the objectives of Latvia's development cooperation policy are to promote sustainable development and the elimination of poverty, as well as to strengthen the rule of law and good governance in developing countries, in particular in Latvia's priority partner countries, by contributing to the implementation of the UN resolution "Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" ("2030 Agenda") and the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals. This is part of Latvia's foreign and security policy through the promotion

of sustainable growth and maintaining peace and security around the world.

In implementing development cooperation, Latvia adheres to a human rights-based approach, and in all development cooperation activities it stresses the horizontal principles of human rights, democracy, gender equality, the engagement of civil society, environmental sustainability, and the integration of climate change issues. In development cooperation, Latvia offers its experience and know-how in the implementation of simple projects, as well as complex long-term programmes. State aid for economic development and promoting prosperity in developing countries is at the core of all these activities. As classified by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), this cooperation does not include military assistance.

In light of Latvia's foreign policy priorities and its comprehensive experience with reforms following the restoration of independence, the priority regions in Latvia's development cooperation policy are the EU Eastern Partnership countries, especially Ukraine, and the countries of Central Asia. Latvia's main partner countries in this context have traditionally been Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Since 2022, African countries have also become a priority.

Currently, Latvia's development cooperation policy is governed by the 2008 Law on International Assistance, the Development Cooperation Policy Guidelines for 2021–2027, and the Development Cooperation Policy Plan for 2024–2027. These documents set the policy objectives, priorities and basic principles, areas of action, measures to be implemented and achievable results for Latvia's bilateral and multi-lateral development cooperation.

In 2022, Latvia's official development assistance (ODA), i.e., the total contribution by the state institutions of Latvia for developing countries, reached 0.36% of its gross national income (GNI), and in 2023 it was 0.33% of GNI. This was the first time that Latvia delivered on its international commitment regarding the amount of assistance to be delivered as a percentage of GNI. In large part, this was due to the support provided by the state and society of Latvia to Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees.

Over the years, Latvia's priority region for development cooperation – the EU's eastern neighbours and the countries of Central Asia – has undergone several geopolitical upsets, which have given rise to significant adjustments in Latvia's development cooperation with the region. For example, in light of the presidential elections in Belarus on 9 August 2020 and the subsequent repressions against civil society, Latvia and international donors in general had to revise their cooperation with Belarus. Latvia is

---

Development cooperation is part of the *acquis communautaire*, which, upon acceding to the Union, Latvia had to transpose and comply with, just as any other Member State.

---

continuing to support Belarusian civil society abroad and its efforts to ensure compliance with fundamental freedoms and democratic principles. At the same time, we are ready to extend comprehensive support for the state of Belarus to commence democratic reforms.

Russia's full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, which started on 24 February 2022, has exacerbated global challenges to security and stability and also created new ones, including the threat of a global food crisis and energy supply disruptions. Meanwhile, Ukraine and Moldova have become EU candidate countries, and for them the support Latvia can provide by sharing its experience with reforms is of particular importance. There is a growing need to reinforce the rules-based international order. The international approach to development cooperation policy is also currently undergoing fundamental change. Over the course of the last 60 years, Western countries have invested political and financial capital into reducing poverty in developing countries, albeit with varying results. With the re-examination of the

---

Russia's full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, which started on 24 February 2022, has exacerbated global challenges to security and stability and also created new ones.

---

outcomes of this policy, and in light of growing geopolitical instability and an increase in global activities by China and Russia, the approach is shifting from development aid to development cooperation, co-creation, and partnerships with greater consideration for the vision of partner countries themselves and sustainability in all aspects (economic, social, and environmental).

At the same time, in recent years, Latvia has achieved long-strived for milestones in development cooperation policy which are opening the door to new opportunities and yielding the first practical results. Funding for Latvia's development cooperation is gradually increasing. 2022

was a turning point in Latvia's development cooperation policy: the Latvian Development Cooperation Agency, a new department of the Central Finance and Contracting Agency, was established based on the initiative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). All in all, the process took six years, from putting forth the idea in 2017 to finalising the legal framework in 2023. The Agency is gradually joining development cooperation projects that are implemented by EU Member States and other donors; it will soon be accredited by the European Commission (EC), which will allow Latvia to serve as a leading country in implementing EU development cooperation projects.

As an important instrument in Latvia's foreign policy, development cooperation promotes sustainable development in partner countries whilst also facilitating the implementation of Latvia's own economic and security interests. For this purpose, politicians and society at large need to be aware of and support development cooperation.

Increasing bilateral funding for development cooperation is a key requirement to be able to attract more financing from other donors within the EU and internationally and to better take advantage of the potential of Latvia's expertise. Since 2005, the MFA has invested a total of approximately EUR 11 million in bilateral assistance, while the funding from other donors that Latvia's contribution has generated is almost 1.5 times higher (around EUR 15.42 million).

## Latvia's Development Cooperation Financing or Official Development Assistance (ODA)

Latvia implements its development cooperation policy both in multilateral formats (mostly through contributions to various international organisations and processes) and bilaterally (through cooperation with partner countries and the execution of specific projects).

The development cooperation implemented by the MFA has to be mostly viewed in correlation with the development cooperation activities of the EU, UN, OECD, and World Bank Group (WBG). In accordance with Latvia's international commitments within the UN and the EU, as well as policy planning documents approved at the national level, Latvia contributes to promoting global development and growth in developing countries.

The OECD DAC defines development cooperation funding or Official Development Assistance as state aid carried out with the economic development and welfare of developing countries as the main objective. Developed countries have committed to providing 0.7% of GNI for this purpose. For Member States that joined the EU after 2002, this target has been lowered to 0.33% of GNI. In its Development Cooperation Policy Guidelines, Latvia has affirmed its commitment to allocate 0.33% of GNI for ODA by 2030 (and 0.23% by 2027), of which 0.15–0.20% of GNI will be earmarked for the least-developed countries. It is important to keep in mind that ODA includes both bilateral and multilateral contributions, including those made from the budgets of line ministries and other government institutions.

Even though the EU and its Member States are the biggest providers of ODA in the world, Latvia's ODA indicators have consistently been the lowest in the EU, including when compared to Estonia and Lithuania in terms of total ODA and the bilateral development cooperation funding provided by the MFA (see Table 1). The only exception was 2022 and 2023, when Latvia's development cooperation activities were significantly influenced by Russia's invasion of and full-scale war in Ukraine: therefore, much greater focus and resources were devoted to Ukraine, considerably exceeding what had been initially planned. Consequently, Latvia's total ODA was 0.36% of GNI in 2022 and 0.33% in 2023. In monetary value, this equaled EUR 137.31 million and EUR 131.61 million,

respectively (see Table 1). Thus, Latvia fulfilled its international ODA commitments for the first time. Bilateral state aid also increased significantly: EUR 85.06 million in 2022 and EUR 72.44 million in 2023 were mostly allocated for Ukraine and supporting Ukrainian refugees in Latvia, as well as for COVID-19 vaccine donations.

The bilateral development cooperation budget of the MFA as the leading government institution regarding development cooperation policy was EUR 1.36 million in 2022 and EUR 1.66 million in 2023 (for comparison: in 2023, in Lithuania it was EUR 4.52 million and in Estonia it was EUR 14 million).

Previous experience regarding funds allocated for development cooperation over the course of the last 10–15 years shows that in coming years our ODA is likely to decrease, as funding for Ukraine is scaled back (with a particularly steep decrease in expenses for Ukrainian refugees in Latvia, which, pursuant to guidelines, may be included in statistics only for the first 12 months) and COVID-19 vaccine donations will have been discontinued. Therefore, the rise in Latvia's ODA in 2022 and 2023 should be viewed as an exception rather than the outcome of determined efforts with optimistic chances of reaching 0.23% by 2027.

In its 2020 Concept Report on Increasing Financing for Development Cooperation in 2021–2025, the MFA provided a detailed analysis of Latvia's progress towards its international ODA targets and proposed several models that would allow for an increase in funding. It must be noted, however, that this was more of a theoretical exercise, and an actual increase in financing did not follow.

Table 1: Comparison of the Official Development Assistance (ODA) of the Baltic States\*.

		2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023 (initial data)
% of GDP	Estonia	0.16	0.16	0.16	0.17	0.17	0.28	0.28
	Lithuania	0.13	0.12	0.13	0.13	0.13	0.28	0.28
	Latvia	0.11	0.10	0.10	0.12	0.12	0.36**	0.33**
Total ODA, millions EUR (development assistance and humanitarian aid)	Estonia	38.15	41.31	43.32	43.81	50.93	191.06	103.90
	Lithuania	52.54	55.01	60.45	63.20	73.05	231.32	181.30
	Latvia	28.32	29.16	30.69	35.64	40.27	137.31	131.61
Of that, bilateral funding (millions EUR)	Estonia	18.02	18.37	15.05	14.64	20.95	148.8	56.48
	Lithuania	13.54	10.22	10.73	10.44	16.32	133.75	93.93
	Latvia	4.02	4.17	3.98	4.37	6.16	85.06	72.44
Of that, MFA bilateral funding (millions EUR)	Estonia	–	–	–	–	–	–	14.00
	Lithuania	2.04	2.03	3.28	3.21	3.98	6.15	4.52
	Latvia	0.46	0.46	0.46	0.69	0.58	1.36	1.66

\* "OECD Data Explorer," OECD, accessed August 30, 2024, <https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?r=503578>.

\*\* Pursuant to OECD DAC guidelines, refugee costs can be included in ODA only for the first 12 months; therefore, it is expected that indicators of ODA as a percentage of GNI will go down.

Even setting aside the dramatic downturn in 2011 due to the economic crisis, when the MFA's bilateral financing for development cooperation was extremely low – a mere LVL 269, the equivalent of EUR 382 (for comparison: in 2008 it was LVL 580,000 or EUR 825,265), the bilateral development cooperation budget of the MFA has still always been small. For eight years (from 2014 to 2021), it fluctuated in the range between EUR 463,813 and EUR 592,400, and as such it fell significantly short of the targets set out in the Development Cooperation Policy Guidelines. It has always been much lower than the development cooperation budgets of the ministries of foreign affairs of Estonia and Lithuania, which in 2017, for instance, already reached EUR 11.9 million and EUR 1.9 million, respectively.

A breakthrough in increasing the budget in Latvia was achieved in 2022 with the start of the war against Ukraine (with a leap to EUR 780,000, as compared to EUR 583,813 in 2021). In 2023, three times more financing was allocated than in 2021 – reaching EUR 1,663,813. Another EUR 3 million can be added to this, which was Latvia's contribution provided by the MFA for the reconstruction of Ukraine.

The annual allocation for development cooperation in the MFA budget for 2024, 2025 and 2026 is EUR 1,863,813.

Despite its low volume, this is the only predictable funding for Latvia's development cooperation. No other state or municipal institution has a dedicated budget line for executing development cooperation activities. The bilateral development cooperation activities they implement are mostly funded on an *ad hoc* basis from their general budgets (there are also planned bilateral activities and programmes, such as state scholarships, participation in missions, etc., which are counted towards the ODA). For new initiatives, these institutions will seek financing from the MFA by taking part in MFA grant competitions, etc.

To promote the sustainability of projects, as of 2022 the MFA has instituted a two-year term for grant projects, while strategic projects are supported for a term of three years, based on Latvia's three-year budget planning period. The MFA aims to distribute about 50% of the funding available through the grant competition for civil society organisations (CSOs), while also supporting cross-sectoral projects (ones involving the public, civil society and/or the private sector) – it also holds a separate co-funding competition specifically for this sector.

In recent years, interest in implementing development cooperation projects in Latvia has been growing, as have the relevant skills of the implementers. The increased interest and abilities on the part of state and municipal institutions, experts, CSOs and the private sector is attested to by the rising number and quality of project applications received in the MFA development cooperation grant competitions. Due to budgetary constraints, it has been possible to support only a small portion of the applications received for grant competitions in recent years. An up-to-then unprecedented number of applications was received for the 2023 grant competition: 69 submissions, of which the MFA could support only 16 (additionally,

seven projects were carried over from 2022, when two-year projects were first introduced). In 2024, 75 applications were received, of which the MFA could provide full support to 10 and partial support to one (11 projects were carried over from 2023).

If we compare Latvia to the other Baltic States, we must admit that despite all three countries having the same starting point in regard to development cooperation policy, 20 years later there is a major difference in funding and capacity. The experiences of Estonia and Lithuania in development cooperation policy serve as a good example for Latvia. Notably, in Lithuania and Estonia, the dispersal of MFA bilateral funding (including funds for Ukraine's reconstruction) has been entrusted to development cooperation agencies.

## **Development Cooperation Projects Implemented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Statistics**

From 2005 to 2024, the MFA's bilateral development cooperation funding has been used for 466 projects and activities in partner countries and in Latvia (there have been 159 projects since 2019, 43 of which were in 2023). At least 53% of all these projects have been funded through grant competitions, thus dispersing 60.1% of the whole development cooperation funding at the MFA's disposal.

Statistics for the period starting from 2005 show that the majority of projects and activities have been implemented by civil society organisations (44.2%), which have received 37.8% of all the available funding, and public sector organisations (42.9%), which have received 41.6% of all the funding. Having received 29.2% of the total funding, private sector organisations have implemented 16.7% of the projects. It must be noted that the participation of the private sector in using the funding dispersed by the MFA has especially increased in the last five years. Education institutions (both public and private) are also notable project implementers, having elaborated 9.9% of all the projects, followed closely by municipal project participants, which have implemented 7.5% of all the activities.

The majority (78.1%, or 364) of projects have been implemented in partner countries, while the remainder have been implemented in Latvia. Regional projects involving several countries account for around 15% of the total, while the majority of projects have provided assistance to a single partner country.

Over the course of 20 years, assistance has been provided to more than 30 partner countries and territories. The majority of projects have been implemented in the EU Eastern Partnership region (59% of all projects and 63% of the total funding), with the top three as follows: 1) Ukraine (23% of projects and 25.7% of the total funding); 2) Moldova (22.7% of projects and 18.4% of funding); 3) Georgia (17.4% of projects and 13% of funding). 15.2% of all projects accounting for 18.1% of the total





Meeting with the Uzbek delegation to discuss gender equality issues; Uzbekistan, April 2022.

Photo from personal archives

funding have been implemented in Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan). Most projects have been implemented in Uzbekistan (12%), accounting for 11.7% of the total funding. In 2023, 36.7% of the MFA funding was used in Ukraine, 22.9% in Uzbekistan, 14.1% in African countries, 7.6% in Moldova, 5.5% in Georgia, 2.3% in Belarus, and 0.4% in Kyrgyzstan.

As Latvia's capacity for development cooperation increases, it has identified as a priority the extension of support to other regions as well, particularly African countries. Three projects were implemented in Africa in 2023, involving South Africa, Cameroon, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

Many projects and activities have also been implemented in Latvia: public awareness campaigns, research, events, the elaboration of strategies, publicity, development education projects, supporting Latvian CSO membership to international organisations, etc. These activities have received 6.1% of the total bilateral funding of the MFA.

## Public Opinion in Latvia Regarding Assistance for Countries Outside the European Union

Development cooperation policy in Latvia was not born out of internal public demand but rather as compulsory solidarity and the result of EU integration. This led Latvia to become a donor country, with all of the international commitments and everything else this status entails. Politically, development cooperation policy has

never generated much interest, and even in periods of rapid economic growth it has not been seen as a priority or an opportunity for enhanced growth.

A results-based indicator for assessing Latvia's development cooperation policy is the achievement of a pre-defined level in public support regarding assistance to countries outside of the EU (the Development Cooperation Policy Guidelines have set a target for 2027 of 85% of the public acknowledging the importance of helping developing countries). While in theory these politically established targets have been attained, an in-depth analysis will reveal that public support in Latvia for eradicating poverty in developing countries is still considerably lower than the EU average. It is more than likely that there is a part of Latvian society that believes that Latvia is a poor country in need of assistance itself. The war against Ukraine has given rise to certain changes in attitudes, as Latvian society has shown a surprising abundance of solidarity. Several civil society organisations focused specifically on providing humanitarian aid were founded in Latvia; organisations of this type had hitherto not been widespread.

According to Eurobarometer public opinion polls carried out from 2015 to 2022, the target set out in the Development Cooperation Policy Guidelines has already been met. The portion of the population of Latvia that believe that support for people outside of the EU is important has increased from 67% to 91%. This support curve has been rising steadily. In 2022, Latvia's indicator surpassed the EU average for the first time ever (it was also the greatest increase among all EU Member States): the EU was at 89%, Latvia was at 91%, and Estonia's indicator in the same period has demonstrated a similar trend. Lithuania's indicator has mostly also been similar, except for 2019, when it rose in Latvia and Estonia but decreased in Lithuania.

However, a more in-depth analysis reveals that, according to the 2022 Eurobarometer results, 65% of respondents in Latvia said that the eradication of poverty in developing countries needs to be an EU priority (the EU average was 80%). Even though this is one of the lowest indicators in the EU, for Latvia it is still an increase, as, for example, in 2018, only 49% of respondents had voiced this opinion (the EU average then was 79%). In turn, only 38% of respondents in Latvia believed that the eradication of poverty in developing countries needs to be one of the main priorities for the government of Latvia (the EU average being 67%); however, this indicator has also increased over time (by 7% since 2020). The reason for this is the fact that a part of Latvian society believes that Latvia is a poor country in need of assistance itself. The main challenges for partner countries cited by respondents in Latvia were peace and security (46%), education (45%) and healthcare (42%). 73% of respondents believed that digitalisation was an important issue for partner countries (the EU average was 79%), and 79% said that the EU can have a positive impact on climate change (compared to the EU average of 89%).



A meeting with Latvian micro-surgeons and Ukrainian doctors studying in Latvia, with support provided through a project implemented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Riga, March 2024. The author of this essay is pictured second from the right. Photo from personal archives

## Partnerships: Mutual Benefits

A major restricting factor in Latvia's development cooperation policy so far has been the limited funding available for bilateral development cooperation. Increased financing for development cooperation would promote the execution of Latvia's economic interests, create opportunities to improve Latvia's development cooperation systems and the community's abilities and experience (learn by teaching others), benefit bilateral relations, and raise Latvia's visibility around the world. Moreover, the planning of bilateral development assistance provides broader opportunities to create synergies with security, trade, migration and other policies and instruments. An excellent example of this is the project "Training of Ukrainian medical staff in microsurgery for the treatment of combat wounds", implemented from 2023 to 2025 by the Latvian Microsurgeons' Association with funding obtained through the MFA grant competition. In this project, Latvia is helping Ukraine: Ukrainian microsurgeons are being trained and the wounded are being treated; but at the same time, Latvian doctors are also learning new skills (project participants stress that they rarely come across bullet wounds in their practice in Latvia) and the internal coordination of Latvia's healthcare system is also being improved.

Increased financing would allow Latvia's state administration institutions and civil society organisations to share their experience, best practices and solutions developed by the private sector (e.g., in the areas of e-governance and clean technologies) to a greater extent and in a better and more sustainable way. Thus, Latvia

would be able to contribute more to the promotion of welfare in developing countries whilst also recognising the private sector as a crucial partner in the implementation of development cooperation (especially regarding innovations). For the private sector, this would be a chance to demonstrate their technologies and approaches, as well as possibly also to find new export opportunities.

Increased financing would also make it possible to implement long-term activities and intensify cooperation with other donors. As the implementers accumulate experience in bilateral development cooperation projects, the capacity of Latvian experts, civil society organisations, and the private sector to take part in projects funded by other donors (the EU and other international organisations, such as UN agencies, the WBG, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the European Investment Bank, etc.) would also improve. It must be noted that one of the main conditions for all of this to succeed is strengthening the Latvian Development Cooperation Agency, obtaining accreditation from the European Commission, and commencing the full-scale operation of the Agency.

Taking part in development cooperation activities and projects can provide significant benefits to the implementers themselves. Due to the current reality (i.e., migration, national agendas, the link between development and security, the increasing financing needs of developing countries, the need to involve the private sector in bridging the financing gap to ensure growth in developing countries, recipient countries turning away from their traditional donors with a greater preference for money from China and Russia, etc.), international political discussions have lately been trending more towards partnerships and securing mutual benefits. The matter is obviously ambiguous. OECD DAC statistical reporting directives stipulate that direct support for exports does not qualify as development cooperation because the main goal must be the promotion of social and economic development in partner countries. At the same time, OECD DAC members' experience shows that the involvement of the private sector in development cooperation can not only benefit the development of partner countries but also facilitate the expansion of donor country businesses to partner country markets. It can therefore be concluded that international solidarity pays off: it creates export and profit opportunities, as well as jobs in donor countries.

Attracting co-financing for development cooperation projects launched by Latvia is another crucial aspect. As was mentioned previously, since 2005, the MFA has invested a total of approximately EUR 11 million in bilateral assistance, while the funding from other donors that Latvia's contribution has generated is almost 1.5 times higher (around EUR 15.42 million). In certain periods, attracted co-financing has been significantly higher, for example, in 2014 it was even 13 times higher than Latvia's own contribution (EUR 5 million for the Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA) project), and in 2018 and 2019 it was 2.6 times higher.

Out of the 39 projects supported by the MFA in 2022, 23 secured co-financing; out of those, 10 were co-funded by the implementer, while 13 attracted co-financing from other donors (the European Commission, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United States, and Sweden). All in all, the attracted co-funding totalled EUR 352,013.88. Out of the 38 contracts signed in 2023, co-financing was planned in 25 projects, of which 17 were co-funded by the implementer and 8 by other donors (the United States, Sweden, and the UNDP).

In recent years, Latvia's collaboration with other donors and participation in large-scale projects has consistently been increasing due to the establishment of the Latvian Development Cooperation Agency; the budget for development cooperation has been slowly growing, thus allowing for more activities to be implemented; and Latvian development cooperation implementers have been accumulating knowledge, capacity, and experience. There has also been collaboration with other donors, albeit at a smaller scale – this includes working together with the UNDP in Central Asia, as well as with the United States in EU Eastern Partnership and Central Asian countries.

The EU's Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021–2027 adopted in 2020 combined the majority of EU external financing instruments into a single one – the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) “Global Europe”, which is, in turn, divided into two programming periods (2021–2024 and 2025–2027). The total budget of the NDICI is EUR 79.5 billion, or about EUR 11 billion per year. The EU and its Member States are the largest global ODA provider. Latvia takes part in the shaping of the EU's development cooperation policy, and by contributing to the budget of the EU it also participates in the funding of EU external action (which includes development cooperation and humanitarian aid).

Most of this funding is used to promote security, good governance, and prosperity in developing countries, to improve their business environment, and to facilitate economic and trade relations. This financing is administered by the EC in collaboration with EU delegations in partner countries. Projects funded by the EU are implemented by EU Member States (their development cooperation agencies, development banks, the public and private sector, and CSOs), partner countries (state administration institutions, and CSOs), other international organisations, financial institutions and other implementers.

EU funding for development cooperation is used in various ways: by providing direct support to the governments of developing countries (budget support), through grants and procurements (services, deliveries, works), and via financial instruments for the private sector (loans and guarantees). The management of funding methods such as grants and procurements can be organised in various ways, with either direct or indirect oversight by the European Commission. In the case of indirect management projects (“delegated cooperation”), the full cycle of

implementing the instrument is entrusted to a third party (e.g., EU Member State development agencies accredited by the EC, development banks or international organisations).

Partner countries have appreciated the knowledge, experience and expertise of Latvian implementers. However, Latvia's involvement in the implementation of EU external financing has mainly taken the form of one type of grant – EU twinning

---

Latvia still has immense potential in using EU development cooperation funding to promote a positive image of the country and “export” its expertise and solutions.

---

projects. As regards the involvement of Latvian implementers in other forms of EU external financing (such as technical assistance projects or procurements), the overall conclusion is that it has been minimal. This has mostly taken the form of individual experts participating in EU-funded projects implemented by other EU Member States or state institutions, and businesses (such as consulting firms) joining consortiums led by partners from other EU Member States.

Therefore, Latvia still has immense potential in using EU development cooperation funding to promote a positive image of the country and “export” its expertise and solutions. We already have success stories to speak of, as Latvian representatives are leading partners in the implementation of several EU development cooperation projects:

- The 10th Phase of the Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA), led by the State Border Guard of Latvia (EUR 21.75 million for 2020–2025);
- The water management project implemented by “Cleantech Latvia” in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (EUR 1 million for 2019–2023);
- Twinning projects (for instance, the National Plant Protection Service is involved in a project in Azerbaijan worth EUR 1.5 million and the Food and Veterinary Service is working on a project in Georgia worth EUR 1.45 million).

Since 2023, the Latvian Development Cooperation Agency has been providing advisory and administrative support to Latvian institutions and other stakeholders looking to apply for participation in EU projects; the Agency also collaborates with other partners to ensure that large-scale projects comply with the technical and financial criteria. Furthermore, only EU Member State development cooperation agencies which have been accredited through the EC nine-pillar assessment procedure are permitted to take the lead on projects in the framework of EU-delegated cooperation. The Latvian Development Cooperation Agency will obtain this accreditation in 2024.

Latvian project implementers have also collaborated in a bilateral format with various donors and cooperation partners. This cooperation has taken place both with the direct involvement of the MFA and at the level of the implementers

themselves. Often enough, only individual experts from Latvia will be involved in such cooperation.

Latvian project implementers have established long-term cooperation with the Development Cooperation Partnership (DCP; previously known as the Emerging Donors Challenge Program) of the U.S. State Department. The DCP is the main source of financing for the programme being implemented by the Riga Graduate School of Law (RGSL) in Central Asia and EU Eastern Partnership countries: 627 professionals from 20 partner countries have completed the RGSL programme since its launch in 2014. In recent years, the Latvian Rural Advisory and Training Centre, the National Rehabilitation Centre “Vaivari”, and the Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry have also been implementing small yet crucially important projects in Ukraine through the DCP.

In 2024, the MFA is planning to conclude a cooperation agreement with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) regarding cooperation on digitalisation. In July 2012, the MFA and USAID signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on cooperation in the area of justice-sector reforms in Moldova. Based on this MoU, in 2012 and 2013 the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Latvia implemented the project “Support for Strengthening the Institutional Capacity of the Justice System of Moldova”. Many other Latvian implementers (e.g., RGSL and MARTA Centre) have also collaborated with USAID.

On 14 March 2022, the MFA and the UNDP signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the implementation of the project “Improved Public Service Delivery and Enhanced Governance in Rural Uzbekistan”. Implementation of the project was commenced in 2019, is scheduled to end in 2024, and the implementers are MARTA Centre, the Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development of the Republic of Latvia, and the State Audit Office.

## **Taking Advantage of the Potential of Latvia's Expertise**

Most of the projects that Latvia has financed thus far have been so-called “soft projects” entailing the transfer of best practices and experience, as well as capacity-building measures. Latvian experts are the main resource in this regard. There is, in fact, a shortage of experts, which is only expected to increase along with the rising need for technical support on Euro-integration projects in Ukraine and Moldova. The Lithuanian Development Cooperation Agency, for instance, has already begun to bring in international experts to work on its projects.

To facilitate more opportunities for Latvian development cooperation project implementers (state administration institutions, CSOs and the private sector) to

take part in EU development cooperation projects in partner countries, one of the core tasks of the Latvian Development Cooperation Agency will be to coordinate and support the work of Latvian experts, as well as to create new opportunities for project implementers from Latvia. The Agency has created a database of Latvian

---

Latvia's expertise has been highly appreciated by its partner countries, as well as by other donors: our national experts are often especially sought after.

---

development cooperation experts so that it is able to identify and contact individuals to invite them to take part in projects and activities. A catalogue of Latvian development cooperation expertise has also been compiled in Latvian and English. Until now, the MFA has drafted reports on already implemented projects (by geographic location or topic) on request – however, such catalogues and information materials about individual projects and implementers should be drafted by the MFA in collaboration with the Agency in a systematic manner. Furthermore, a single visual identity should also be created, which is why

a communication strategy and brand for the Latvian Development Cooperation Agency is currently being elaborated. A single visual identity will promote the visibility of Latvia's development cooperation both at home and abroad. So far, publicity events of the Latvian Development Cooperation Agency have used the coat of arms of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; however, that carries restrictions on its use and it is not widely recognised by the public. The Latvian Development Cooperation Agency also plans to provide support to implementers regarding opportunities to take part in projects, thereby increasing expertise and training. In the training of experts from state administration institutions, the Agency needs to collaborate with the Latvian School of Public Administration and the State Chancellery.

## Best Examples

### Good governance and gender equality

**MARTA Centre** is a Latvian women's rights advocacy organisation in Latvia which has also been working outside the country since 2002, particularly in Ukraine, Belarus, and Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan).

For several years MARTA Centre has been part of the Women for Peace Dialogue international network, which brings together women's organisations from Eastern Partnership and Central Asian countries and was established immediately after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea. MARTA Centre receives support from EU programmes, the government of Latvia, the Nordic Council of Ministers, U.S.



and international foundations, and individual donations. The average annual budget of MARTA Centre exceeds USD 1 million.

The organisation has implemented several MFA-funded development cooperation projects in Central Asia and Eastern Partnership countries, including establishing two women's rehabilitation centres in the Chernihiv Oblast of Ukraine in collaboration with Ukrainian civil society organisations, with the aim of strengthening and supporting women who have become victims of the war. Since 2003, MARTA Centre has been actively working in Uzbekistan, often in extremely challenging circumstances. As a result, inclusive public service centres have been created in remote regions of Uzbekistan: Karakalpakstan, Jizzakh, Qashqadaryo, Namangan, Surxondaryo, Syrdarya and Tashkent. As a result of the work done by MARTA Centre, crucial legislative amendments relating to violence against women were adopted in Uzbekistan in 2023. In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the organisation has shared knowledge and drafted methodological materials for education boards and schools, parents, and local communities in the Kyrgyz and Tajik languages. Coalitions for education board employees, NGOs, politicians, and parents willing to act to keep girls in school have been created in the Osh Region of Kyrgyzstan and the Sughd Region of Tajikistan. The organisation has also shared knowledge and provided support for women leaders and encouraged women to take on leadership roles, as well as promoted women's engagement in democratic and governance processes, such as strengthening cooperation between the state and NGOs and seeking solutions to social problems.

**Riga TechGirls** is an organisation focused on educating and inspiring women and girls in the field of technology. Since 2016, the organisation has been offering training courses and organising workshops, inspiration events, hackathons, and conferences. Riga TechGirls helps women of all ages to learn about technologies and has created a strong and supportive community around itself. The organisation's team consists of industry experts with a background in both technology and business. Riga TechGirls has taken part in various international projects, attracted funding from international investors, and organised scholarship competitions. Implemented projects include: the grant project "Female Founders Across Borders" in Uzbekistan in 2022 and 2023; the grant project "STEM School for Girls" in South Africa and Cameroon in 2023; and the grant project "Tech Training for Girls in Egypt "Girls in Tech"" in Egypt in 2024–2025.

**Riga Graduate School of Law** is a specialised graduate school of law founded in March 1998 based on an agreement between the governments of Latvia and Sweden on developing international education in law in the Baltic States. Since 2013, RGSL has been cooperating closely with the government of Latvia to develop new and innovative study programmes and to strengthen good governance and the rule of law in partner countries.

RGSL has been an important partner for the MFA in implementing development cooperation projects in the areas of education, corruption prevention, transparency, and reforms. It has successfully implemented cross-disciplinary programmes on EU law and economics to support EU Neighbourhood Policy countries, as well as Central Asian and Western Balkan countries. The first Advanced Programme in Law and Economics for the European Neighbourhood Policy Countries, Central Asia and the Western Balkans was launched in 2014. Since 2016, a shortened version of the programme has been offered, which, as of 2017, is called the Intensive Programme in European Law and Economics for European Neighbourhood Policy Countries, Central Asia, and the Western Balkans. This programme was created in response to requests by several donors to reduce the duration of the programme (so that representatives from partner countries would need to take shorter leaves of absence from their work, and more senior level officials and specialists would be able to attend the programme, all of which would also result in lower costs of the programme).

As of the end of 2023, 14 study semesters had been completed and 647 representatives of public administration and civil society had been trained. Overall, participants of the programme have hailed from 20 countries. The programmes offered by RGSL have proven to be sustainable development cooperation activities that provide a practical contribution and allow Latvia to share its experience with reforms. At the same time, they have also raised Latvia's visibility as a knowledge transfer hub for countries in neighbouring regions.

From 2015 to 2019, RGSL implemented various short-term projects aimed at helping Central Asian countries and Ukraine to improve their corruption prevention capacity and reform their civil service. During this time, 10 short-term, customised projects were implemented.

To be able to achieve lasting results by facilitating reforms in EU Eastern Partnership countries, Central Asia, EU Neighbourhood Policy countries and the Western Balkans, RGSL is actively pursuing new donors to keep funding the programme in future. The total amount of financing attracted from other donors for the implementation of the intensive programme and the anti-corruption programme in 2015–2023 was more than USD 3.5 million.

## Climate and agriculture

**CLEANTECH LATVIA** is a clean energy cluster bringing together Latvian companies and research institutes in the area of clean technologies. **CLEANTECH LATVIA** consists of two structural units: the Clean Technology Cluster and the Latvian Biotechnology Association. On behalf of its members, the cluster offers market research, strategic planning, training, planning, and the implementation of various environmental solutions for municipalities, governments and industries relating to

water, waste, air, and energy efficiency, as well as a full range of public services for local, regional and national administration bodies.

CLEANTECH LATVIA has been working in Central Asia since 2012. In 2016, it opened offices in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The cluster has organised numerous study visits for representatives of government and the private sector – from Uzbekistan to Latvia and other EU Member States – as well as provided training courses in Central Asia.

CLEANTECH LATVIA has implemented several development cooperation projects with the support of the MFA:

- 2017: the grant project “Latvian Clean Technologies Cluster CLEANTECH LATVIA Support for Regional Autonomies (Hakimiyats) to Raise Capacity of Rural Regions in Uzbekistan”, wherein the cluster trained competent regional specialists on topical environmental issues in three regions of Uzbekistan: Navoiy, Bukhara and Qashqadaryo.
- 2018: the grant project “Capacity Building in the Uzbek State Administration for Sustainable Development”, wherein one of the areas of focus was developing agriculture in the Fergana Region, which entailed support for regional agricultural reforms and business development; the second part of the project concentrated on energy efficiency, particularly in heating. In the framework of the project, expert advice was compiled and provided on water and wastewater facility reconstruction projects, the creation of environmentally friendly conditions for agricultural production, smart cities, waste disposal systems, and resource optimisation; a total of 70 specialists were trained during the project.
- 2020: the grant project “Modernisation of Municipalities Public Services” in Uzbekistan; the project consisted of 13 seminars focusing on the maintenance and management of modern heating infrastructure.
- 2020: the co-financing project “Capacity building of Industry Associations of Engineering Companies in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan”. The goal of this project was to improve the services provided by industry associations in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to engineering companies by strengthening these associations’ capacity to implement international projects.
- 2021: the grant project “Capacity Building for Implementing Investment Projects in the Fields of Water Supply and Sewerage in Uzbekistan”. A training course was created for more than 100 employees of the company “UZSUVTAMINOT” to raise their professional competence and improve their skills.
- 2021: the co-financing project “Capacity Building of Industry Associations of Engineering Companies in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan”.
- 2022: the co-financing project “Capacity building of Industry Associations of Engineering Companies in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan”. During the project, a package of documents was drafted for the introduction of construction specialist certification in Uzbekistan to allow relevant legislative amendments to be

presented to the government of Uzbekistan – *inter alia* amendments to the Law on Construction and other related legislative acts – and necessary regulatory acts were also drafted, for example regarding assessing the competence of construction specialists.

From 2019 until 2023, CLEANTECH LATVIA implemented an international project co-funded by the EU entitled “Capacity Building of Industry Associations of Engineering Companies in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (ENGINE)” in the framework of the Central Asia Invest V grant programme “Boosting Small Business Competitiveness”. The project aimed to improve the capacity of sectoral associations, to provide versatile and competitive services to engineering companies in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and to introduce engineer certification, share European know-how and showcase the experience of international experts in engineering and the certification of engineers. Thus, the project promoted cooperation between Europe and Central Asia. The budget of the project totalled EUR 1 million.

**The Latvian Rural Advisory and Training Centre (LRATC)** was founded in 1991 as a subordinate body of the Ministry of Agriculture; as of 2004, it is a limited liability company. The LRATC is the largest and most influential institution in Latvia implementing rural development policy activities, including awareness-raising and training for farmers throughout the country. Its extensive experience with international cooperation and its participation in many projects is proof of the LRATC being an appreciated and respected partner in Europe. Over the past five years, the company’s annual turnover has been almost EUR 10 million.

The LRATC has accumulated extensive experience with EU integration processes, and its experts possess excellent knowledge of EU law and issues pertaining to agriculture and rural development. Latvia’s experience in providing agriculture advisory services is a valuable model for the further development of a centralised agriculture consultation system in Ukraine.

The LRATC has created a broad international cooperation network and is one of the founders of the European Forum for Agricultural and Rural Advisory Services (EUFRAS). The EUFRAS network currently consists of 38 advisory services from 26 European countries, and the LRATC is one of its leading members. The LRATC has implemented numerous projects to transfer knowledge to policy-makers and farmers in Ukraine on such issues as developing added-value products and promoting the use of new methods of collaboration between farmers and NGOs. From 2014 to 2021, several training programmes were provided in collaboration with the Ministry of Agrarian Policy and Food of Ukraine and the National Association of Agricultural Advisory Services of Ukraine; these focused on the role of the Farm Advisory System (FAS), legislation, and balanced rural development in Ukraine. In 2017, the LRATC implemented an MFA-supported project:

“Strengthening Ukraine’s rural advisory system: on the road to full integration into the EU Single Market of the agriculture and rural development sector”.

The LRATC is highly competent in implementing international projects: it has been working with projects in the framework of Horizon 2020, Erasmus+, the INTERREG programme of the EC and various other programmes, and therefore the Centre has accumulated experience and established an institutional system for the management and monitoring of international projects.

The LRATC has implemented the following development cooperation projects funded by the MFA:

- 2023: “Promoting the competitiveness of small and medium-sized farmers through the Rural Demonstration Method for Innovation and Knowledge Transfer in Crop and Livestock Production”.
- 2023 and 2024: “Action Plan for the Harmonisation of Ukraine’s Rural Development Legislation Promoting Use of EU Pre-accession Assistance for Rural Development to Raise the Competitiveness and Export Capacity of Small and Medium Enterprises in Ukraine”, co-financed through the 10th round of the DCP programme (with support from the MFA and the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv). This project has also been granted co-funding from the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv for 2025 as part of the 11th round of the DCP programme.
- 2024 and 2025: “Increasing the Competitiveness of Rwandan Small and Medium Agricultural Producers by Strengthening the Availability of Knowledge on Product Quality Requirements, Product Diversification and Market Promotion with Focus on Horticulture, Aquaculture and Food Processing”.

In 2023, the LRATC went on a pre-assessment visit to Rwanda, where they met with governmental and non-governmental organisations involved in the implementation of agricultural policy in Rwanda. A proposal for a development cooperation project has been drafted and submitted for the 2024 grant competition.

## The Road Forward

In order to use the available resources and opportunities as efficiently as possible, coordinated action by all institutions in Latvia needs to be promoted in the areas of foreign policy, finance, economic relations and development cooperation. A current challenge is combining the development cooperation efforts of all entities involved in the promotion of Latvia’s external economic interests and exports (the Ministry of Economics, the Ministry of Finance, the Investment and Development Agency of Latvia and the development finance institution ALTUM) and other line ministries (the Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development, the Ministry of Transport, etc.).

A much higher awareness of and involvement in development cooperation policy by the private sector of Latvia is needed. The development cooperation system of the EU is undergoing a paradigm shift, from focusing on development assistance and the eradication of poverty to implementing Team Europe and Global Gateway projects (geopolitics combined with the economic interests of both parties), where private sector, international, EU and national financial institutions are playing an increasingly important role. Latvia's expertise has been highly appreciated by its partner countries, as well as by other donors: our national experts are often especially sought after. Latvia's relatively recent experience with reforms and EU integration is compelling because it is a successful example of a country having transitioned and integrated into the international system.

Most of the projects that Latvia has financed thus far have been focused on transferring best practices and experience, as well as on capacity-building measures. Latvian experts are its main resource in this regard. And there is a growing shortage of experts, which is only expected to increase along with the rising need for technical support in Euro-integration projects in Ukraine and Moldova. One of the main tasks for the Latvian Development Cooperation Agency will be coordinating and supporting the work of Latvian experts and creating new opportunities for Latvian project implementers. So far, Latvia has mostly focused on the EU Eastern Partnership and Central Asia regions, where activity has mainly been driven by the fact that Latvian representatives possess good Russian language skills and an understanding of the historical experience of the partner countries. At the same time, Latvian implementers have immense potential elsewhere as well, particularly in Africa, where partner countries are displaying "fatigue" with their traditional donors. Expanding development cooperation beyond our traditional regions should also be promoted in the context of [fostering] greater involvement of the private sector, as this would help Latvian companies enter new markets, especially in Africa.

Concrete thematic areas of focus need to be agreed upon – areas where Latvia has the most to offer. The Latvian Development Cooperation Agency then needs to concentrate its activities on these areas and rally potential implementers around them. Such areas could include good governance and gender equality, digitalisation in agriculture, and forestry.

Latvia needs to take a more active involvement in the Team Europe Initiative (TEI) and initiatives in the framework of the Global Gateway strategy in the regions and countries that are a priority for Latvia. In light of digitalisation being a horizontal priority in development cooperation, Latvia needs to continue its active participation in the TEI platform "Digital for Development" (D4D), in which the MFA has been involved since 2024.

Furthermore, it must also be taken into consideration that at the international and EU level, private sector-oriented financial instruments (loans and guarantees for

exports and investments), such as the European Fund for Sustainable Development+ (EFSD+), are becoming increasingly important in development cooperation. More and more budgetary funds within EU external financing instruments are being allocated for this modality. An assessment should be carried out on the opportunities and added value of creating a Latvian national development bank (or a joint Baltic development bank). Such a development bank could be created by broadening the mandate of ALTUM.

Increasing bilateral funding for development cooperation is a key requirement to be able to attract more financing from other donors within the EU and internationally, and to better take advantage of the potential of Latvia's expertise. For comparison: the bilateral development cooperation budget for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia in 2023 was EUR 14 million, whereas for the MFA of Latvia it was EUR 1.66 million.

By contributing more to the development of its partner countries and addressing global challenges, Latvia would demonstrate its commitment to fulfilling its international obligations and its co-responsibility in the promotion of peace, security, and sustainable development around the world. This would also serve to shape a positive environment for Latvia's candidacy for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council in the 2026–2027 term. The experience of other countries shows that not only does the election campaign for the UN Security Council raise a country's international visibility, but it also opens up new opportunities for entrepreneurs and development cooperation project implementers.

# Notes on a First-Hand Experience in UN Operations

Interview with Dainis Ozoliņš

Lieutenant Colonel **Dainis Ozoliņš**, Military Assistant to the Head of Mission at the United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO), spoke with Aivars Puriņš, National Security Adviser to the President of Latvia and Secretary of the National Security Council<sup>1</sup>, on 22 March 2024.

## **Let's begin with an introduction. How did your career start?**

My name is Dainis Ozoliņš and I am an officer in the National Armed Forces of Latvia (NAF). I've been in the service much longer than I've been an officer: I joined the NAF on 16 October 1992. I started out as a conscript at the Border Guard Training Centre in Rēzekne. I have to note here that at that time, the border guard was part of the armed forces. I served there until March 1993, if I'm not mistaken. At that time, the National Defence Academy of Latvia was being restored. I was offered the chance to try getting in. So, I thought: "Why not?" I hardly expected to succeed, but the idea of being able to spend a couple of days in Riga was alluring. To my great surprise, I was accepted to the Academy. Since then, I have come to understand that you have to grab any opportunity you are given.

## **When and how did you first come into contact with the United Nations? What are your earliest memories about the UN?**

My earliest memories about the UN date back to the Stabilisation Force (SFOR). I took part in operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1999, and in the Kosovo Force (KFOR) in 2007. Those were peace-keeping operations led by NATO Member States operating under the mandate of the UN. In Bosnia and Kosovo, there were armed units both from NATO Member States and from other countries such as Ireland and Finland. We were a NATO military coalition working closely with the United Nations. That was my first contact.

---

<sup>1</sup> National Security Adviser to the President of Latvia and Secretary of the National Security Council from August 2023 until April 2024.



**What was your first personal experience with the UN outside of NATO-led operations?**

In August 2014, we received a letter that had made its way from the Latvian Mission to the UN via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Ministry of Defence and finally to the NAF Joint Headquarters. The letter said that Latvia should apply for posts at the UN in New York. It mentioned several vacancies in military planning and the analytical service. Seeing as the competition for these posts is on a global scale, Latvia's chances of success were assumed to be quite low.

Three officers, myself included, applied. We sent in all the documents, which again travelled the whole chain: the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Mission and the Secretariat in New York, and then – silence. As time went by, I heard through the grapevine that both of my colleagues were being examined and interviewed, the ball was rolling, but I never heard back at all. I thought: “Oh, well, so that’s that.” A fun fact: two of the three of us had the last name Ozoliņš. Then, all of a sudden – I think it was two days before Christmas – I receive an e-mail from New York saying that they had accidentally interviewed the wrong Ozoliņš, and they wanted me for an interview first thing the next morning. I’m sitting there in my kitchen; I join the Skype call and am met with a big table surrounded by serious gentlemen in black suits. A female colonel led the interview.

**Did you prepare for the interview in any way?**

No, not at all. Luckily, I wasn't asked many questions about the UN, as the main focus was my profession and ability to analyse how I would react in various scenarios. It was mainly about the specific UN approach. After the interview – more silence. A couple of months went by, and then in February 2015 I received a letter saying that I had been selected by the recruiters and I was welcome to join them in New York. At that moment, I had no idea that this would not just be a two-year thing. Nor did I have any idea that the region where I would be working would expose me to a whole new world that I had practically no idea about up to then. Coincidentally, NAF Commander Raimonds Graube was at the Latvian Mission to the UN in New York right at that moment. He was congratulated on a Latvian representative having been selected for a position at the UN Secretariat. I doubt he knew what exactly was going on; he called me up and said: “Hey, did you know that you got a job in New York?”

Initially, I was scheduled to leave in June, but 2015 was yet another difficult budget year for the UN and everything got pushed back to late July. I sat waiting, uncertain of when I would get my plane ticket, or when and what would happen from there. I flew out on 18 July, and on 20 July I walked into my office in New York.



Exhibit honouring 75 years of UN peacekeeping operations. A picture of Lieutenant Colonel Dainis Ozoliņš as a representative of UNTSO was exhibited among others, May 2023, Times Square, New York. Photo from personal archives

### **What was more of a shock: life in New York or the work environment?**

Both. My family came with me: my wife Aija and my little daughters Arta and Ancīte. We had four suitcases. For the first two weeks, we lived in a hotel. I was going to work while also searching for a place for us to live. Ancīte started school that year. This was mid-summer in New York, the hottest time of the year. That first morning, I put on my suit, got on the subway, and by the time I got off I was completely drenched. I got to the Secretariat – a 22-storey building – I then I had to figure out where to go and how to find anything. I spent the whole day in “on-boarding”: reading instructions, getting my access badges and figuring out where I needed to go.

### **When did you get the feeling that you know what you are doing?**

Good question. The UN Secretariat has a unit called the Military Assessment Team. Officers from all over the world work in this unit – they are intelligent and kind people, very educated. I was extremely lucky to end up there and be able to work with this group for the next three years.

The UN Office of Military Affairs is subordinated to the Under-Secretary-General of the UN, the Office is headed by a lieutenant general. There are about 100 military staff members working at the Office, which is only a tiny part of the total staff at the

UN headquarters – all in all there are about 5,000 people there. The Military Assessment Team was my department.

This was after the 2014 events in Crimea. I thought that the UN would need someone with an intimate understanding of the situation in Eastern Europe, but they told me: no, buddy, in the name of neutrality, you will be working the Middle East – Syria. Alright, but I know absolutely nothing about Syria. They said: no, worries, you'll learn.

I had an office in New York, a home, and my family, but I also had to visit my region of responsibility quite often. I spent the whole three years travelling to Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel. I am very grateful to my wife Aija. I think her “secondment” of taking care of the children and the home abroad was much harder than my assignment.

As strange as it may sound, at that time, the UN system seemed to me to be puzzling and bureaucratic. In contrast: the Middle East seemed dynamic, alluring, and mysterious. I travelled around talking to people and other agencies and missions: UNDOF (the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force), UNIFIL (the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) and UNTSO, where I work now. I gained pretty good insights and, in the end, I even provided recommendations to the Military Staff Committee, as well as the TCC (Troop Contributing Countries). Due to safety concerns, the UNDOF had at that time evacuated from Syria, but the UN was trying to get UNDOF back in. It was my job to get a grasp on the situation and propose next steps.

**Looking at the bigger picture: why does the UN head and organise military missions and operations? Why are these needed?**

The UN believes that any issue can be settled by political means and political leverage. Unfortunately, there are regions where only a soldier, with their experience and knowledge, can understand the new unconventional circumstances – and not only understand it, but also predict how the situation will unfold.

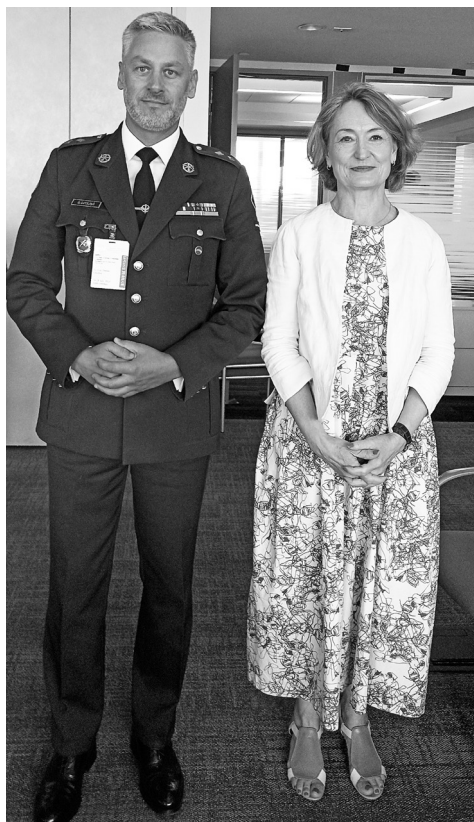
And of course the presence of international armed units is a serious means of deterring both sides of the conflict from escalating.

Obviously, a lot has changed over the last 10, maybe even 20 years: there is no longer “party A” and “party B” and UN forces deployed in between them with the aim of deterring further escalation in the conventional sense. Today, this is a grey area: the borders have blurred, and the situation is dynamic and difficult to grasp. Now there are unconventional forces possessing state-of-the-art weaponry, and

---

Unfortunately, there are regions where only a soldier, with their experience and knowledge, can understand the new unconventional circumstances.

---



Meeting with Ilze Brands-Kehris, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, during a conference of UN military mission commanders, UN Headquarters in New York, July 2023.

Photo from personal archives

mission is active for 50 or 75 years, as is the case with us, I don't think you can call that a success.

The UN peacekeeping mission that I am serving on right now was what started it all: it was the very first mission in the history of the United Nations. The International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers is marked on 29 May – the day when the first mission was created in 1948.

### **Has the objective of the mission changed since then?**

Our mandate is written down on half a page, and it has not changed to this day.

also conventional armies preferring unconventional combat methods. This is a rather difficult time for the UN as peace-keepers because we are still holding on to a very conventional and conservative approach.

It is important to differentiate between peace-keeping and supervision. The number of supervision missions is growing right now, while the number of peace-keeping missions is going down. UN forces have no mandate to achieve peace; the parties to the conflict themselves have to ensure peace, and UN forces merely serve as a means to this end and sometimes even a platform for discussions between the parties.

**Some UN missions have a very long history, including UNTSO, where you are working at the moment. What conclusions can be drawn from that? How would you describe it?**

There are different ways to look at it. Cyprus is a good example – there is relative peace there. There is an area managed by the UN which is a conflict-free zone at the moment. Naturally, if a mis-

**The mandate is not updated? It remains in force as long as there is no new decision?**

As long as the situation in the region is unstable, we stay there. We are the only mission whose mandate is not renewed every year. All other missions have their mandates renewed by the Security Council. I guess we are a “forever” mission.

We have two functions. One is observing and reporting to the UN Security Council. This is more of a tactical assignment.

But the main contribution to improving the situation comes from regional cooperation with countries. Once every quarter, the Commander and his team, which I am a part of, visits each country to meet with its political and military leadership. Sometimes we are messengers, thus removing any possibility of misunderstanding or rash action. Moreover, we can warn the parties involved to preventively ensure stability. I believe that this instrument works even better than the supervision.

**You travelled throughout Israel, Syria, Lebanon...**

Lebanon, Israel, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. We meet with the leaders of the armed forces, prime ministers, ministers: rather high-ranking political leadership.

**How did you end up in this mission?**

The story begins back in New York. It was 2017. The UN was ready to restore its mission in Syria. The current Commander of UNTSO, who was a colonel then, and I were sent to Syria to draft a recommendation on whether the mission could return or not. At that time, we said “no”: we knew the territory where the UN was supposed to come in was not safe and the situation was not under control. Many people were quite indignant with this decision because they weren’t aware of what was actually going on over there, and political positions were not aligned with the situation on the ground, which we were very familiar with. I had to do a great deal of explanatory work in New York. I think we did a very good job of it – we substantiated and explained our decision. In July 2018, my assignment in New York came to an end and my family and I returned to Latvia.

Several years went by. One day, I get a call from a former colleague of mine, who is now a major general and Commander of UNTSO; he tells me: “Listen, I’m at UNTSO in the Middle East, I was just appointed and I need you to come on board as my Head of Office.” Latvia’s military representative to the UN and Military Attaché to the United States supported this job offer, and I am very grateful to him for that. The

---

As of early 2024, there are three Latvian troops in Lebanon (UNIFIL), but before that I was for a long time the only person from Latvia in any of the 12 UN-led missions around the world.

---

offer came at just the right time, as Latvia is running for a seat on the UN Security Council. Participation in the most prestigious mission of the UN would give Latvia bonus points while also being an opportunity to get involved in this mission, which we will have succeeded in doing.

As of early 2024, there are three Latvian troops in Lebanon (UNIFIL), but before that I was for a long time the only person from Latvia in any of the 12 UN-led missions around the world.

**Latvia has a very low level of involvement with UN-led missions. Perhaps with good reason?**

Missions differ greatly, both in terms of participants and assigned duties. The missions in the Middle East (UNDOF, UNIFIL and UNTSO) are complicated, but interesting. Latvia vied for participation in these missions but was unsuccessful for many years.

UNTSO has only 153 observers covering the whole Middle East, and furthermore this is not a technical task undertaken from an observation post. Serving here requires a very in-depth understanding of the situation. You can quickly find yourself in the middle of a conflict, and you need to know what to say, what to do, and how to describe it afterwards.

The UNTSO mission consists of 28 Member States. And we have the “Big Five”. This is the UN’s only regional mission. That means that we are not located in just one country, but in five. We are in Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt (the Sinai Peninsula). The 153 observers for the whole region are not a lot at all. We are monitoring two conflicts – Israel-Lebanon and Israel-Syria – with martial law in force in both cases. There are observers stationed in a fixed location. And there are mobile patrols; these are mostly in Lebanon, as the observation posts were destroyed after the war in 2006. We suffered rather extensive losses during that time.

**Would you say that serving on a mission of this kind is also an important lesson in politico-military affairs?**

I’d say that it’s even more political than military. We have negative examples as well: where an observer says something not quite right or asks the wrong question, resulting in cooperation with the mission being suspended for a long time. In the Middle East, this is viewed in a much different way than we do here. Relationships can be destroyed in the blink of an eye, and restoring them is difficult. All observers must be very astute and possess situational awareness.

**Your personal development aside, why is it important for Latvia to take part in these kinds of missions?**

It is a global platform where countries can more or less express their position and talk. I have to say though, that today, the UN is more about political statements

than discussions. Of course, we have coalitions and alliances. And Latvia usually voices the common opinion. But that doesn't mean that we don't have a voice of our own. It is an opportunity to express our opinion in the global arena. To my mind, this is a unique platform.

It is crucial for us to be part of the process at the global level. We are not all alone in our little Latvia; anything that happens in the world has an impact on us. For instance, we've seen how the conflict in Israel has had a major impact on the conflict in Ukraine. We cannot sit idly by – we have to go and get involved.

However, just being there in the region but not gaining anything in the way of experience is also useless. We have to assess where and with whom we participate in these missions. Latvia's military capabilities need to be visible to the world. We tend to hide, shy away and be very humble. But we need to be seen. We need to be able to act, and we are indeed able to do so – I believe that 100%.

**Going a bit more personal – how have you changed from that Dainis 10 years ago in New York who had no idea which door to take?**

I like the international environment, and I enjoy working with people from different countries. I have ditched the “fly on the wall” attitude. Over the years, I've come to see that we are actually much better prepared than many other countries. We could move mountains with the knowledge that Latvian officers have. We tend to sell ourselves short.

**This mission has existed for more than 70 years. Do your conversations ever have a philosophical dimension along the lines of: what's the use, you travel and work for weeks, but nothing happens, there is no progress?**

When we marked the 75th anniversary last year, we took a moment to reflect on what has been achieved. I'm not quite sure if it has been a success. On the one hand, it could be better.

But at the same time, we understand that it's not the UN that will bring peace, but the parties themselves. We try to do what we can, what our mandate allows us to do. I've seen first-hand that we can stop a local conflict. Knowing that lives have been saved – that alone is reason enough to do this.



During a visit to UNTSO and IDF positions, Golan Heights, 17 September 2023.

Photo from personal archives

**Having had the chance to take part in UN missions and experience them from various perspectives, how have your feelings and perceptions of their objectives and necessity changed?**

Over the course of 32 years in the service, my sense of responsibility has expanded significantly. Earlier, I didn't see much farther than my own unit or platoon, and I didn't worry much about it. Today, I see and understand the regional situation – that is my contribution. We train officers so that they understand the complex environment surrounding their mission. I am able to ensure that the Commander can work effectively because I myself understand the context and can offer possible solutions. Observers come here for a year, which is a rather short time to get a grasp on the Middle East, but I can say with full certainty that this region and its people leave no one indifferent. This is not a case where well-informed optimists turn into pessimists.

**Have you counted how many years you've spent in operations outside of Latvia? Do you get the chance to compare Latvia with other countries?**

To my mind, Latvia is absolutely heaven. Absolutely! To anyone complaining about life being difficult in Latvia, I say: go to the south of Syria, see how people live there. I've been away for more than 10 years, maybe even 15. But the moment you return is always very special. I think Latvia is a nearly perfect country.

**You must certainly have a life outside of the office and your work. Do you get to learn about the local culture?**

I've walked all across Damascus; I've been to Maaloula and Sednayah. Being in Jerusalem, it would be a sin to not [walk around] and see it. Every week, I take one day to find somewhere new and learn about that place. I've travelled throughout Jordan, the Sinai Peninsula and Lebanon. My favourite cities are Amman and Damascus, Tel Aviv is also fantastic.

Damascus is indescribable – one of the oldest cities in the world. The breath of history and how well everything has been preserved is amazing.

Last autumn, I was in Petra in Jordan. I have the Old City of Jerusalem just outside my window. You can walk around for a whole year and still keep finding something new. The officers here even compete to see who can take everyone somewhere that none of them have ever been before.

The food is healthy: so much fresh fruit and vegetables that are not all that easy to come by back at home. Naturally, after a while you start craving beetroot or cabbage soup and sausages. But the food here is excellent, I can't complain.



**The more you learn about the environment and culture, the easier it is to lead negotiations...**

Definitely. The way we work means that we become part of the local community – we meet with people, have coffee and shop at the local stores. People tell me about their history, their families, and their problems. At night, we hear the gunshots and in the morning we read the news. Eventually, these experiences become part of who you are.

**As an experienced officer, what would be your advice to new officers specifically regarding the military dimension of the UN? Show interest, try to apply? What should they do to succeed?**

The younger generation needs to study extensively. In terms of human resources, the UN has the whole world to select from. It is a very demanding environment. We, officers, obtain the majority of our education abroad. This is a major benefit, as this allows us to learn languages and how to work in an international environment. My advice is to go and learn: take part in missions and training courses, spend time in other countries and talk with people.

**This links up with the broader security aspect. For Latvia to be secure, we need friends.**

Israel is also a small country, but it has an enviable propensity for cooperation, to be present and to adopt the best from the world. They have learned to do this. I think we could be just as good at this as long as we have that drive, that self-awareness and pride. We are not less than, we are even better! That is exactly what our young officers need to do.

**So, education is key?**

You need education and experience. Especially if you have made your way up the ranks from the bottom to the Joint Headquarters. That is highly appreciated. And another thing: when you are writing your essay or at the interview, you have to be yourself, say what you are thinking. At the interview, you have to be able to defend your opinion and discuss it freely, to demonstrate your critical thinking. Don't be scared!

**In conclusion, a personal question: when have you felt the most afraid during your time on UN missions?**

The most dangerous was definitely 7 October, when Hamas terrorists attacked Israel. It was a shock. I had never experienced something like that first-hand. Everything that happened then – the shelling of cities, public outrage, shock, and anger – it definitely made me consider things I had never thought about before in my 50 years. Danger is just a part of daily life here, even if there are no missiles flying.

This is the Old City of Jerusalem; it is the biggest mixture of religions in the world; here anything can happen at any given moment.

I've experienced air raids on Damascus and its airport. During the Syrian civil war, I drove by car from Damascus through all the Islamist-controlled territories up to the Syria-Jordan border. That was quite a risk.

**And what has been your happiest moment?**

Your happiest moment is always ahead. In my case, that'll be the moment I can hug my family. Leaving will inevitably be a little bitter, but going back home will be the sweetest of all.

VI

# FUTURE PROSPECTS

Anete Biķe

## The United Nations and Youth

The one challenge that is the same for youths all around the world, regardless of nationality, gender or race, is coming of age and finding your place in society. Many are forced to grow up much quicker than others, having experienced violence or having had to seek stability after extreme weather destroyed their home. The first major mistake in the creation of any youth engagement mechanism is to assume that youths are a social group with shared interests. Latvian novelist Alberts Bels once wrote: “A person on their own is no one; only in contact with society do they become someone.” In that same vein, youths do not constitute a group as such – they become one only in the context of social organisation. Without a doubt, youths share a desire for quality education, fluency in all things digital, and an existential dread of climate change. However, each of them has a different vision of which issues need to be solved as a priority and a different expectation for the standard of living.

The UN defines youths as people aged 15 to 24, but every country has its own scale of measure. It is worthwhile to classify youths as a separate social group in order to identify the challenges they face and to create opportunities for them to realise their potential. But at the same time, it is important to stress that previous generations carry the responsibility to not only educate youths but also to actively include them into the economy and society. This inclusion has to be comprehensive so that everyone has equal opportunities to pursue their different interests.

In addressing the UN, youths from around the world consistently highlight the merely symbolic engagement of their generation as a major hindrance to progress. Over the years, young people have gained more and more opportunities to express their opinion on important political issues – however, they still lack sufficient access to power. Half of the world’s population is under the age of 30, yet this age group accounts for just 2.8% of parliamentarians throughout the world. Some may object, saying that youths cannot be entrusted with power because they are inexperienced, can be stubborn and are most certainly idealistic. Yet power is not something to be given or easily taken away. The principles of democracy bestow it on everyone at birth. And so this begs the question: are older generations responsible enough to instil in youths early on an awareness of their power and to create mechanisms by which this power can be implemented for the sake of future? We must not forget that

youths will be the ones who have to live the longest with the systems we are creating today. Policy-makers driven by moral and ethical responsibility ought to listen to young people's opinions on what governance institutions, economic and social systems, and attitudes towards nature and international relations should look like.

## UN Youth Engagement Strategy

The joint definition of the UN Sustainable Development Goals was a turning point in the creation of youth engagement mechanisms. The UN resolution “Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (“2030 Agenda”) aims to ensure prosperity for future generations. The UN engagement strategy “Youth 2030”, drafted under the leadership of UN Secretary-General António Guterres, envisions that UN institutions shall not only protect the human rights of youths but also reach out to them and proactively engage them in sustainable development processes. The systematic involvement of youths at the UN level is ensured through the presence of civil society at important UN events.

In September 2022, UN Member States unanimously agreed to create a permanent UN Youth Office, which advises the Secretary-General on the role of the world's youth in maintaining peace and security, human rights and sustainable development. Organic structural change within the UN is slowly but surely taking shape. The organisation is shifting from multilateralism to multi-stakeholderism. However, the final say on any decision remains in the hands of the sovereigns.

Established based on an initiative by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the UN Youth Delegate Programme urges Member States to introduce permanent mechanisms for engaging youth in the work of Member State missions to the UN. Over the course of two decades, about 80 countries in the world have introduced such practices to involve the younger generation directly in the shaping of national foreign policy and the UN agenda. Latvia is among this group of progressive countries thinking in the long-term.

## The History of Latvia's UN Youth Delegate Programme

Latvia introduced the UN Youth Delegate programme in 2019. Kristiāna Plāte, who was at the time a law student and youth activist, spent three years nurturing this idea in discussions with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Science. These persistent discussions paved the way to building trust between the policy-makers of today and the younger generation. Latvian youths demonstrated initiative, political will and the ability to organise themselves. Having

appreciated their aptitude and the potential of the UN Youth Delegate Programme, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, headed by then Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs, supported the introduction of the Programme, undertaking to henceforth support the selected Youth Delegates and involve them in UN processes. The key objective for the introduction of the Programme was to have the UN Youth Delegate serve as a

---

The key objective for the introduction of the Programme was to have the UN Youth Delegate serve as a conduit to foster constructive and productive dialogue between young people.

---

conduit to foster constructive and productive dialogue between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and young people, especially in rural regions.

The main duties of Latvia's UN Youth Delegate are: 1) organising national-level educational events about multilateralism and UN agenda items, and 2) consulting the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about youth opinions and representing these at an international level. These duties include organising visits to schools, conferences and workshops for youths in Latvia, as well as taking part in international meetings and high-level events at the UN, such as the UN High-Level

Political Forum, the UN General Assembly, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Youth Forum, and the Conference of the Parties (COP). The UN Youth Delegate is appointed through a selection process wherein youth organisations and cooperating ministries agree on the most suitable individual who possesses knowledge of the UN and international relations and who is experienced in working with youth. To ensure continuity and consistent efficiency, a system that features a senior and a junior delegate is being instituted as of 2025.

## The Engagement of Latvian Youths at the UN

Having been appointed as the Latvian Youth Delegate to the UN in 2022, I set out four priority areas for my work that coincide with the Sustainable Development Goals: quality education, gender equality, climate action, and peace, justice, and strong institutions. I was further encouraged by our diplomats who commended me for having correctly assessed the spirit of Latvia's foreign policy and coupled it with the interests of the younger generation. We created a team of enthusiastic and skilled volunteers and prepared to diligently educate Latvian youths and represent their interests. With news of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, it was clear to me that we needed to take immediate action to focus on supporting Ukrainian youths. This is intrinsically linked to Latvia's own security.

The 66th session of the Commission on the Status of Women took place in March 2022. During the event, UN Youth Delegates from all over the world met with

Jayathma Wickramanayake, the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth. On behalf of several youth representatives from Europe and the United States, the Latvian UN youth team had drafted a joint statement about Russia's violations against the rights of women and youths in Ukraine, with a special focus on the sexual violence perpetrated by Russian troops. Denis Ganzha, the Ukrainian Youth Delegate, joined the discussion remotely from the suburbs of Kyiv. Right away, he announced that this may be the last time we see him, because at that time, in March, the Russian Armed Forces were trying to capture Kyiv. We referred to the General Assembly's resolution demanding that the Russian Federation immediately end the illegal use of force and withdraw all troops from Ukraine. Youth Envoy Jayathma Wickramanayake heard Denis's testimony and our joint statement and expressed her sympathy for this tragedy, recalling her own childhood experiences during the civil war in Sri Lanka. Then the conversation moved on to other geographical regions.

That was the first time that I truly grasped the reality of how relative all problems really are. While I aspire to the principle of sovereign equality, at that moment I realised that in a global context, small countries need to create powerful unions based on specific shared priorities. I witnessed a positive example of this in the dialogue headed by Ambassador Andrejs Pildegovičs between Latvia and small island states on limiting the rise of sea levels. International relations and development cooperation start with personal relationships – open discussions, solidarity and joint action. We established regular communication and close cooperation with the Estonian Youth Delegate Linda Luts, the Lithuanian Delegate Klaudijus Melys and Ukrainian Delegates Denis Ganzha and Alina Kurska. Our collaboration, which started as crisis coordination by lobbying for military and diplomatic support for Ukraine's fight against evil, quickly evolved into mutual emotional support.

---

That was the first time that I truly grasped the reality of how relative all problems really are.

---

Just a few months later, our cooperation was further reinforced at the first Baltic Youth Forum. More than 60 youths from the Baltic States gathered at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia to brainstorm ideas for promoting the resilience of our societies and how the Baltic States could further support Ukraine. Ukrainian Youth Delegate Denis Ganzha was again forced to join us remotely as he had just received his conscription notice and would shortly be going to the front lines, while Alina, Linda and Klaudijus attended the event in Riga in person. The Forum was organised with the support of the embassies of Ukraine and Sweden to Latvia. The youths worked selflessly, formulated the necessary amendments to international regulations, and proposed policy actions in the areas of defence, energy and education aimed at promoting security and equality in the Baltic region.



UN Youth Delegates Alina Kruska (Ukraine), Anete Biķe (Latvia), Linda Luts (Estonia) and Klaudijus Melys (Lithuania) at the Baltic Youth Forum at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, August 2022. Photo from personal archives

## Promoting Youth Participation

The jointly drafted resolution “Promoting Societal Resilience” was submitted to policy-makers both in Latvia and internationally. Gunda Reire, Advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs at that time, and several leading experts in law and the energy sector took the time to work with youths in a considerate and constructive manner. Roberta Metsola, President of the European Parliament, also had the opportunity to appreciate the ability of our youths to self-organise when, during her visit to Latvia, she met with youth activists who introduced her to their aforementioned vision. The annual national conference of Latvia’s UN Youth Delegate Programme is a unique practice. It has been spotlighted in a recent study on the models and functioning of the UN Youth Delegate Programme around the world.

Mentoring, the sharing of information and encouragement are key elements in promoting youth engagement. The opportunity to be present, voice their opinion





**Oļegs Ilģis, Latvian diplomat, Olexandr Mischenko, Ukrainian Ambassador to Latvia, Gunda Reire, Advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Anete Biķe, Latvian UN Youth Delegate, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, August 2022. Photo: Anete Annija Nežberte, UN Youth Delegate Programme**

and take decisions boosts youths' confidence in their own knowledge and abilities, allowing them to better understand and wield their power.

The Latvian UN Youth Delegate Programme is an excellent example of how to involve youths in policy-making in the name of moral responsibility. The leadership of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, diplomats from the ministry's International Organisations and Human Rights Department, and [representatives of] Latvia's Missions to the UN in New York and Geneva have all enthusiastically cooperated with youths as partners. Ambassadors to the UN Andrejs Pildegovičs and Bahtijors Hasans, diplomats Oļegs Ilģis, Agnese Vilde, Ilze Rūse, Dace Rikmane, Linda Ozoliņa and Kristīne Fainveica have provided especially noteworthy support and shown genuine interest in working with youth. Their confidence and initiative in maintaining active dialogue with young people and seeking ways for them to be part of decision-making processes has not only cultivated an inclusive environment but has also strengthened cooperation and continuity in the foreign service. Latvia's

foreign affairs sector is definitely a positive example: when enough people feel a sense of responsibility towards the next generation, youth engagement becomes an integral part of policy planning.

In order to address systemic challenges, respectful intergenerational dialogue needs to translate into practical support. The young people who have been part of the Latvian UN Youth Delegate Programme since 2019 have voluntarily dedicated their time, energy, and knowledge for the greater good of society. This is all an invaluable investment in the future. Most of them have participated in the Programme while also studying and working. Investing financial resources in youth programmes is a key part of taking responsibility for comprehensive youth engagement in economic and social affairs. So many youth engagement mechanisms have no permanent budget, nor can they provide any remuneration for people's efforts. At an individual level, the practice of unpaid academic or professional internships at national and UN institutions is concerning to youths. This is, in effect, discrimination impinging on equal opportunities, leading to youth programmes being less sustainable and effective. Budding talents with the potential to flourish into strong professionals have to fight for survival in an inhospitable environment.

If the argument of youth engagement being a moral responsibility is not persuasive enough, it may be worthwhile to look at the practical benefits of transforming the aforementioned symbolic engagement of youths into a full-fledged and systemic effort. Young people possess an unprecedented digital aptitude and cross-disciplinary thinking. Being familiar with technologies and the value that can be derived from their proper application, young professionals have a higher potential for innovation. And innovation is the best way to guarantee the vitality of our defence systems in the age of hybrid threats. For Europe to maintain its strategic advantage, it needs to be able to compete with the technological advances made by Russia and China. Furthermore, innovation is the key to sustainable development, and the young generation is most certainly the keeper of that key. Youths also believe that by investing in science, we will be able to create revolutionary solutions to mitigate climate change and its adverse consequences.

## Youths as Champions of Positive Change

Over the years, the Latvian UN Youth Delegate Programme has broken several stereotypes of what a sectoral expert looks like: it may very well be a young female professional or an individual representing a marginalised group. Our team has successfully self-organised in the name of sustainable development. The study on how the UN Youth Delegate Programme works in different countries revealed that Latvia has one of the largest UN youth teams in the world. The execution of the Delegate's

strategic vision is supported by several advisers – young professionals in the areas of security, education, law, and energy. The implementation of projects is supervised by a programme coordinator. Volunteers with an immense sense of responsibility provide invaluable support in the organisation of events. Every UN Youth Delegate in Latvia has encouraged other youths to cooperate and co-create; they have delegated responsibilities and provided opportunities for engagement.

All members of the team have the chance to be a part of international processes. For example, ahead of the UN Youth Delegate taking part in the UN Transforming Education Summit in New York, the Delegate's adviser on education was able to address UN Member States and industry experts in Paris, urging them to include critical thinking skills in school curricula. In collaboration with the Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development and the Ministry of Climate and Energy, advisers on climate issues have also been providing support to the Latvian Delegate every year in preparation for the annual COP.

Security advisers have shown initiative in organising support for Ukraine by, for example, taking part in the march in solidarity with the women of Ukraine held in Riga on International Women's Day in 2022, and by backing Latvia's candidacy for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for the 2026–2027 term. An in-depth study has been performed looking at how to raise public awareness about conflicts around the world. The Latvian team has organised several Model United Nations events for schoolchildren in Latvia to introduce them to the work of the Security Council and the dynamics of global politics.

The National Action Plan for the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution on Women, Peace and Security identifies UN Youth Delegates as active social partners in raising awareness about gender equality and the objectives set out in the resolution. Advisers on gender equality actively collaborate with non-governmental organisations in holding workshops for youths on equality, the elimination of gender-based violence, and the work of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. The main theme has been raising public awareness about the different but interconnected concepts of sex and gender. Words have the power to channel action in a way that is conducive to equality – however, use of the term “gender”, which has become a matter of course at the UN level, is still struggling to take hold in the Latvian language. The Latvian UN Youth Team urges society to study these concepts and adopt the appropriate language.

Support provided by the whole team in working with youths in Latvia allows the UN Youth Delegate to focus on consulting the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, maintaining regular communication with their colleagues at the Ministry and the Permanent Mission to the UN in New York, taking part in various events, such as the drafting of the annual report on foreign affairs, and presenting the vision of Latvian youths in the international arena on a regular basis. Every year, in preparation for major events such as the UN General Assembly or the UN ECOSOC Youth Forum,

the European UN Youth Delegates coordinate their positions. Youth Delegates fully assume the role of young diplomats: they advocate for the interests of Latvian youths while also learning to represent their country. It is quite possible that in the near future, holding the mandate of the Latvian UN Youth Delegate will be equal to a paid full-time job.

## Shaping a Vision for the Future Together

Youths from the Baltic region are inclined towards critical- and green-thinking – they are educated, enterprising, empathetic, and inclusive. Being aware of the threats posed to the Baltic States by Russia’s hybrid warfare, they are already actively involved in strengthening the resilience of society. Witnessing destructive disinformation campaigns, the sexual violence perpetrated by Russian troops in Ukraine and the use of energy as a weapon of war, they are organising informal educational workshops for their peers to promote critical thinking, knowledge about reproductive health, and the ability to take smart decisions on energy consumption. They trust science. They advocate against violence, they understand that violence against women stems from unhealthy gender stereotypes, and they try to eradicate these from their own lives and public consciousness in general.

Baltic youths do not stop there. They organise solidarity marches for Ukraine and walk in pride parades. They participate in sectoral consultations with civil society to urge today’s policy-makers to implement progressive policies, such as subsidising sustainable projects and investing in innovations. Baltic youths actively advocate for an EU with a stable and unified energy network, competitive regulation of artificial intelligence, and comprehensive coordination in the area of security. At the UN level, they are calling for compliance with international law and respect for the principle of the self-determination of states. They are sharing the stories of survivors of war crimes because they understand that documenting these is key for ensuring accountability. When youths are treated as equal cooperation partners, social dialogue is enhanced, knowledge and values are transferred, and co-creation is promoted. The Latvian UN Youth Delegate Programme will continue to organise educational events to promote peace and equality and to mitigate climate change. Active participation by Latvian youth in UN initiatives is crucial for the security and development of Latvia and the Baltic region as a whole.

The road to a safer, more inclusive, and sustainable world begins from the mindset that youths are also the leaders of today.

Gunda Reire

# Mission Impossible: Reforming the UN Security Council

*The Security Council needs greater credibility, legitimacy and representation to do all that we demand of it.<sup>1</sup>*

The paradox of the United Nations is this: great expectations lead to even greater disappointment. Russia's war against Ukraine and the stalemate at the UN Security Council has reached points to a deep crisis in the collective ability to act. But this is nothing new. The necessity to reform the UN Security Council is a long known and generally accepted truth, the common argument supporting this being that the world has changed profoundly since 1945, and the Security Council needs to change along with it. An oft-cited contention is that the Security Council is delegitimized by the obvious incongruity between its current composition and the diversity of the countries of the world.

The legitimacy and effectiveness of the UN Security Council has been called into question with reference to the four main sources of change in global politics since the end of World War II. First, geopolitical change: the balance of economic and military power has shifted significantly. Second, normative change: the world has become more democratic, and multilateralism embraces the concepts of diversity, equality and representation. Third, the systemic consequences of decolonisation: the number of UN Member States has doubled and has become very diverse. Fourth, veto rights: the permanent membership granted to certain states along with veto rights is widely seen as undermining democratic principles and, in many cases, blocking the maintenance of international peace and security. These sources of change are objective facts, but so are the attempts to reform the UN Security Council over the decades which have ended in fiasco.

Latvia has consistently advocated for such reforms. In his address at the 78th session of the UN General Assembly in New York, President of Latvia

---

<sup>1</sup> United Nations, "A more secure world: Our shared responsibility. Report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change", accessed 01.07.2024, [https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/hlp\\_more\\_secure\\_world.pdf](https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/hlp_more_secure_world.pdf).

Edgars Rinkēvičs highlighted: “Revitalization of the UN system and meaningful reforms of the Security Council are necessary. The inability of the Security Council to act caused by the abuse of the veto is a serious concern. That is why Latvia supports efforts to make the Security Council more transparent and accountable for its inaction. Veto power was not created as a privilege but as a responsibility. Latvia supports a more just, equitable representation of the regions on the Security Council, including countries from Africa and small island developing states.”<sup>2</sup>

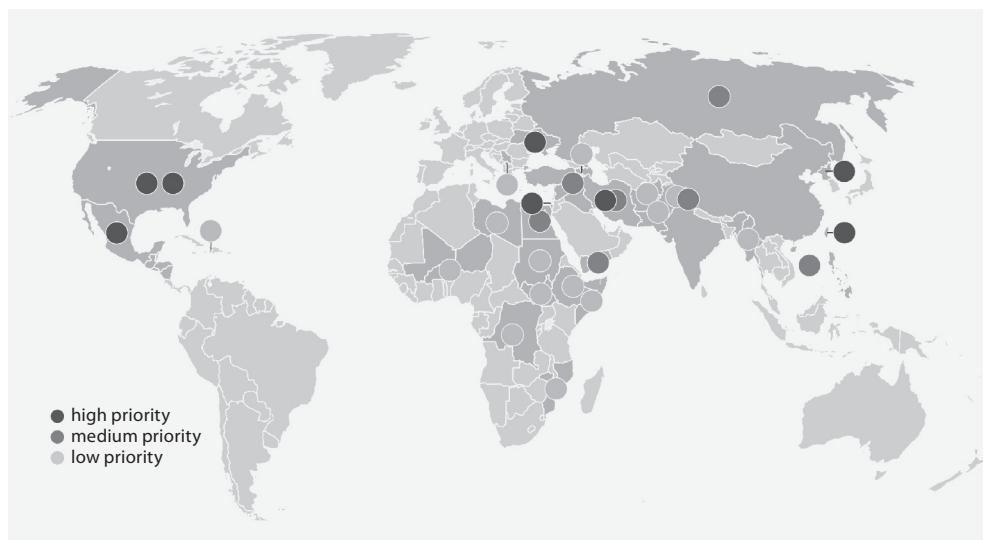
However, UN Member States are harshly divided on what form any change should take, and even on whether reforms should primarily focus on improving the effectiveness of the Council or how representative it is. Because of this diplomatic impasse, the Security Council remains captive to the reality of 1945. Will a meaningful reform of the UN Security Council ever be possible, or is it already doomed to be a cyclical ritual? Should the discussion be refocused from expanding the institution to reinforcing the role of the General Assembly? Or refining the working methods of the Security Council?

## Why are Reforms Necessary?

The world order is changing before our eyes. Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine is threatening the international system, which is based on rules and multilateralism. The aggressor is a nuclear power and a permanent member of the UN Security Council who ought to be safeguarding the principles enshrined in the UN Charter. The majority of critics of the Security Council believe that its effectiveness and legitimacy have been especially tarnished since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. But that is not the only conflict in the world. While methodologies and definitions may differ, there are about 25 to 30 global and/or armed conflicts ongoing in the world at this very moment. Its failure to stop aggression and conflicts casts doubt on the effectiveness of the UN Security Council. There is a certain *déjà vu* every time an international conflict breaks out – the UN response is feeble and the divide between its Member States widens. This impedes swift, effective and united action.

---

<sup>2</sup> Chancery of the President of Latvia, Statement by Edgars Rinkēvičs, President of the Republic of Latvia, at the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly, <https://www.president.lv/en/article/statement-edgars-rinkevics-president-republic-latvia-78th-session-united-nations-general-assembly>



#### Main conflicts in 2024.\*

Source: Council on Foreign Relations, “Preventive Priorities Survey”, (New York, Washington: Council on Foreign Relations, 2024), 2.

\* This methodology assesses the priority of a conflict based on its impact on U.S. interests and the likelihood of it occurring or continuing into the next year.

The impetus for reforming the UN Security Council is clear. Nearly eight decades after its establishment, decisions in the Council are still immutably being taken by the same five permanent members (P5) – the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia (after the collapse of the Soviet Union) and China – while the other 188 countries of the world have the opportunity to be elected to one of 10 non-permanent seats for a term of only two years. Uncharacteristically of democratic institutions, the P5 have been granted veto rights, the use of which slows down or altogether paralyzes the Council’s ability to maintain international peace and security in many conflicts, including Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. This consequently restricts the main function of the UN Security Council, the only institution in the world able to authorize the use of military force in international relations.

The UN Charter refers to the veto rights of the permanent members in broader terms, describing the voting procedure without actually mentioning the word “veto”. It stipulates that decisions of the Security Council shall be adopted by an affirmative vote from 9 of the 15 members, including the concurring votes of the Big Five. Therefore, a negative vote by one or more of the permanent members shall constitute a veto. Abstention or non-participation in the vote by a permanent member does not have this effect. Moreover, the veto may not be used when deciding procedural matters.

**UN Charter****Article 27**

1. Each member of the Security Council shall have one vote.
2. Decisions of the Security Council on procedural matters shall be made by an affirmative vote of nine members.
3. Decisions of the Security Council on all other matters shall be made by an affirmative vote of nine members including the concurring votes of the permanent members; provided that, in decisions under Chapter VI, and under paragraph 3 of Article 52, a party to a dispute shall abstain from voting.

In all fairness, it must be noted that opinions on the issue of the veto rights are not clear-cut. Some support these rights by arguing that the ability of the permanent members of the UN Security Council to block action promotes international stability, serving as a safety vent against arbitrary military intervention and providing crucial reciprocal protection against dominance by superpowers. The granting of veto rights to the winners of World War II was a key condition in the creation of the United Nations in 1945, which, considering the sorry fate of the League of Nations, was not an altogether illogical step. However, critics rightly argue that the veto is the most undemocratic element of the UN and the main cause of a lack of collective action in regard to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Since 1945, we have seen the emergence of global players such as India and Brazil, not to mention Japan and Germany. A huge number of countries have become UN Member States. Even though the total number of Member States has nearly quadrupled (from 51 to 193) due to decolonisation, the Security Council has only been expanded once: in 1965, when the number of elected members was increased by four (bringing the total number of members from 11 to 15), thus adjusting the decision-making procedure without prejudicing the veto.

Latvia has consistently held that the actions of Russia as a permanent member of the UN Security Council undermine the principles and values enshrined in the UN Charter. It is unacceptable that an aggressor state can apply a veto to block UN Security Council decisions on taking action to resolve the situation. For years, Latvia has supported the view that the permanent members should refrain from using their veto rights on matters pertaining to mass crimes, genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

The reasons why reform is needed are obvious. Yet the reform itself seems to be dead in the water, and it is difficult to imagine a situation or circumstances where it could be possible in its current form. Since 2005, when UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan attempted an overhaul of the UN, the international community's interest in reforming the Security Council has waned. While it has



been a noteworthy – one might even say a compulsory – topic raised at the UN General Assembly’s High-level Debate in New York every September, practical steps have never followed.

## Obstacles to Reforming the UN Security Council

The obstacles are almost insurmountable. First, there are the procedural steps of amending the UN Charter. Second, there are the differing and often contradictory opinions of the Member States on any need for expansion and the appropriate extent and conditions thereof. Third, there is sharp disagreement over the current veto rights and whether they would be granted to new or semi-permanent members. Fourth, there is mounting doubt over whether any viable expansion, even one that would increase the representativeness of the Security Council, would actually improve its functioning, effectiveness and decision-making.

### About the Procedure

Any amendments to the composition of the UN Security Council or its decision-making procedure must be affirmed by two thirds of all UN Member States, including every permanent member, along with the adoption of relevant legislation in each country. There are no provisions for exceptions. In effect, it is impossible to revoke the veto rights of a permanent member of the UN Security Council, because that would require amending the UN Charter, which would require the agreement of all permanent members.

In light of increasing geopolitical competition and greater political polarisation around the world, the chances of amending the UN Charter and updating the Security Council seem rather slim. The Big Five have previously not been open to any change at all – neither in relation to abolishing their vetoes, nor in relation to granting new rights – thus rendering any amendments to the UN Charter impossible.

#### **UN Charter Article 108**

Amendments to the present Charter shall come into force for all Members of the United Nations when they have been adopted by a vote of two thirds of the members of the General Assembly and ratified in accordance with their respective constitutional processes by two thirds of the Members of the United Nations, including all the permanent members of the Security Council.



**Edgars Rinkēvičs, President of Latvia, at the UN Security Council High-level Open Debate in New York on 20 September 2023.** Photo: Ilmārs Znotiņš, Chancery of the President of Latvia

## **About the Need and Permissible Extent of Reforms and their Conditions**

In December 1992, the UN General Assembly set up an open-ended working group for reviewing the issue of equitable representation on the Security Council. More than three decades later, this working group is still convening for meetings without any tangible result to speak of. In 2005, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan attempted an ambitious and comprehensive reform of the UN, which made a lot of waves but bore little fruit. As for reforming the Security Council, models were many, expectations were high, but the results were zero. At that time, a coalition of four states (Brazil, Germany, India and Japan) exerted finely coordinated international pressure in an attempt to gain permanent seats on the Security Council; however, China and the United States cut this initiative for reform short.

In 2008, the UN General Assembly adopted a decision on the “Question of equitable representation on and increase in the membership of the Security Council and related matters”, which called for commencing intergovernmental negotiations about reforming the Security Council in the informal plenary of the General Assembly during its 63rd session, but not later than 28 February 2009. Part of the reason why the process still remains in a diplomatic deadlock after 15 years of futile discussions is the fact that the Member States have never agreed to negotiations based on a unified text. Almost all UN Member States support the reform of the

Security Council, but they are not unanimous as to whether the main objective is curbing superpower authority or ensuring equitable global representation.

Where are the main underlying issues preventing effective intergovernmental negotiations? Three blocs of countries continue to maintain irreconcilable positions on the matter of reforming the UN Security Council. The first bloc is the so-called G4 coalition, consisting of the four main candidates for a permanent seat on the Council: Brazil, India, Japan and Germany, along with their supporters. The G4 are striving for the same status as the current Big Five, although they are showing a certain flexibility on the matter of granting and using veto rights. The G4 also support two permanent seats being assigned to Africa.

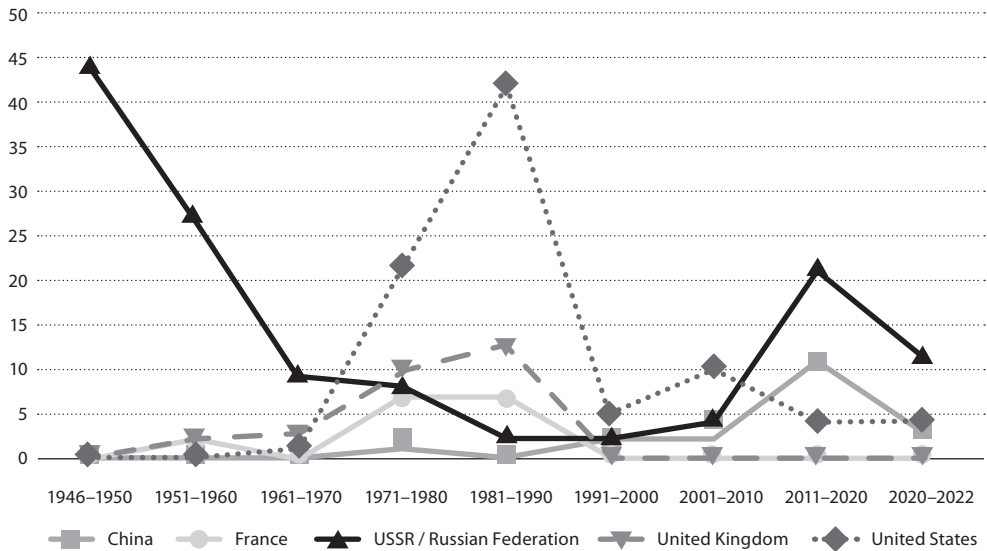
The African Union, with its 54 members, is the second bloc of countries. Africa remains committed to the Ezulwini Consensus of 2005, which calls for two permanent seats with full veto rights to be granted to the continent, along with at least three additional non-permanent seats. From the African perspective, the composition of the UN Security Council is especially archaic and unfair: while current affairs relating to the continent take up most of the Council's agenda and the majority of UN peacekeeping operations are in Africa, it still does not have a single permanent representative, which would allow it to convene Security Council meetings pursuant to the UN Charter. However, it must be noted that the Africa bloc has not clearly specified which countries would occupy the two permanent seats. In international debates, Nigeria and South Africa have been mentioned as the most likely candidates, yet these countries come up against opposition from Algeria, Ethiopia, Egypt, Kenya and Senegal. The Africa bloc has also not shown any flexibility on the possible option to not grant veto rights to new permanent members. The third bloc is the "Uniting for Consensus" coalition, led by the regional competitors of the G4: Argentina, South Korea, Italy, Mexico, Pakistan, and Türkiye. This bloc supports expanding the elected membership of the UN Security Council from 10 to 20 seats. This would allow more countries of the world to be part of an equitable, globally representative Security Council, lessening the hierarchy of the superpowers – but at the same time, the decision-making process could become even more cumbersome.

There are also some countries that object to such solutions, proposing instead the introduction of an altogether new category of membership – semi-permanent seats on a rotational basis. Namely, the number of countries that would be granted the semi-permanent seats would be relatively limited and clearly defined, with each country periodically holding the seat on a rotating basis. In negotiations over

---

For the Security Council to be more effective and legitimate, its anachronistic composition would need to be updated, and its undemocratic decision-making principles revised.

---



#### Use of veto rights at the UN Security Council (1946–2024).\*

Source: Graph drawn by the author of this essay based on United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld Library, “Vetoes – UN Security Council Meetings & Outcomes,” accessed 21.08.2024, <https://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick/veto>.

\* Use of veto rights as of 1 August 2024.

Security Council reform, Lichtenstein has started advocating for the introduction of a potential alternative category, proposing a model that would be a bridge between the different positions of UN Member States: a new member category with longer terms for six countries (8–10 years) and the possibility of immediate re-election. New veto rights would not be granted; instead, a compulsory review period would be established following the implementation of the reform. This model would also entail an additional seat for the Eastern European Group with a mandate of two years without the possibility of re-election.

The three blocs of countries have differing opinions. Since no change is possible without the support of the Big Five, it is also pertinent to look at how they view the issue. Relatively recently, the United States has shown an interest in moving the process forward, possibly by working on a specific proposal for reform. In his address to the UN General Assembly in September 2022, U.S. President Joe Biden noted consistent U.S. support for “increasing the number of both permanent and non-permanent representatives of the Council” and also added a new idea into the mix, creating extensive international reverberations. President Biden highlighted that “this includes permanent seats for those nations we’ve long supported and permanent seats for countries in Africa, Latin America, and

the Caribbean”.<sup>3</sup> The United States, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, thus gave a clear signal that it sees a place in the expansion of the Council not only for the candidates it had already previously backed (Japan, Germany and India) but also for a wider range of countries, including the so-called Global South.

Russia seems to be sceptical of increasing the number of permanent seats or undermining its global status in any other way. This position is exacerbated by its current diplomatic isolation and its label as an aggressor and *enfant terrible*. China objects to new permanent members and is particularly defiant about the efforts of its regional competitors – India and Japan. Of the permanent members representing the West, France and the United Kingdom have been the most progressive. In recent years, France and the UK have supported the expansion of the UN Security Council and have leaned towards reform due to criticism about Europe’s overrepresentation on the Council.

The proposed reforms currently on the table are mutually contradictory, and there is no win-win proposal. At the same time, there is no alternative that would allow for a broad agreement to be reached. The veto rights of the Big Five cannot be revoked. Granting veto rights to new permanent members of the UN Security Council could be a step even deeper into the quagmire and only add fuel to the fire in the debate over double standards and a lack of democracy within this institution. In turn, for potential new permanent members, the idea that a seat would be granted without veto rights falls short of the mark, as it would still leave them a step below the Big Five. Many UN Member States have a general objection to the idea of forming a new group of permanent members. In addition, there are the conflicting and competing geopolitical interests of different countries. Even if the number of elected members is increased to include a broader range of countries on the Security Council, thus ensuring a more equitable global representation, the problem of the veto would remain.

## Alternative Routes to Address the Shortcomings of the Security Council

The inability of the UN Security Council to respond to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in 2022 led to the General Assembly’s pledge to enhance its role in international security. Thus, the Security Council has reinvigorated the UN General Assembly. Frustrated with Russia’s veto, other members of the Council dusted off

---

<sup>3</sup> The White House, “Remarks by President Biden Before the 77th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, 21.09.2022”, accessed 01.07.2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/09/21/remarks-by-president-biden-before-the-77th-session-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly/>.

Voting Started		02-Mar-22		11:55:11	
<b>Item 5 - Draft resolution A/ES-11/L.1</b>					
<b>Aggression against Ukraine</b>					
<input type="checkbox"/> AFGHANISTAN	<input type="checkbox"/> CAMEROON	<input type="checkbox"/> FINLAND	<input type="checkbox"/> KUWAIT	<input type="checkbox"/> NEPAL	<input type="checkbox"/> SAUDI ARABIA
<input type="checkbox"/> ALBANIA	<input type="checkbox"/> CANADA	<input type="checkbox"/> FRANCE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> KYRGYZSTAN	<input type="checkbox"/> NETHERLANDS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SENEGAL
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALGERIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CENTRAL AFR REP....	<input type="checkbox"/> GABON	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> LAO PDR	<input type="checkbox"/> NEW ZEALAND	<input type="checkbox"/> SERBIA
<input type="checkbox"/> ANDORRA	<input type="checkbox"/> CHAD	<input type="checkbox"/> GAMBIA	<input type="checkbox"/> LATVIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NICARAGUA	<input type="checkbox"/> SEYCHELLES
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ANGOLA	<input type="checkbox"/> CHILE	<input type="checkbox"/> GEORGIA	<input type="checkbox"/> LEBANON	<input type="checkbox"/> NIGER	<input type="checkbox"/> SIERRA LEONE
<input type="checkbox"/> ANTIGUA-BARBUDA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CHINA	<input type="checkbox"/> GERMANY	<input type="checkbox"/> LESOTHO	<input type="checkbox"/> NIGERIA	<input type="checkbox"/> SINGAPORE
<input type="checkbox"/> ARGENTINA	<input type="checkbox"/> COLOMBIA	<input type="checkbox"/> GHANA	<input type="checkbox"/> LIBERIA	<input type="checkbox"/> NORTH MACEDONIA	<input type="checkbox"/> SLOVENIA
<input type="checkbox"/> ARMENIA	<input type="checkbox"/> COMOROS	<input type="checkbox"/> GREECE	<input type="checkbox"/> LIBYA	<input type="checkbox"/> NORWAY	<input type="checkbox"/> SLOVAKIA
<input type="checkbox"/> AUSTRALIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CONGO	<input type="checkbox"/> GRENADA	<input type="checkbox"/> LIECHTENSTEIN	<input type="checkbox"/> OMAN	<input type="checkbox"/> SOLOMON ISLANDS
<input type="checkbox"/> AUSTRIA	<input type="checkbox"/> COSTA RICA	<input type="checkbox"/> GUATEMALA	<input type="checkbox"/> LITHUANIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PAKISTAN	<input type="checkbox"/> SOMALIA
<input type="checkbox"/> AZERBAIJAN	<input type="checkbox"/> COTE D'IVOIRE	<input type="checkbox"/> GUINEA	<input type="checkbox"/> LUXEMBOURG	<input type="checkbox"/> PALAU	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SOUTH AFRICA
<input type="checkbox"/> BAHAMAS	<input type="checkbox"/> CROATIA	<input type="checkbox"/> GUINEA-BISSAU	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MADAGASCAR	<input type="checkbox"/> PANAMA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SOUTH SUDAN
<input type="checkbox"/> BAHRAIN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CUBA	<input type="checkbox"/> GUYANA	<input type="checkbox"/> MALAWI	<input type="checkbox"/> PAPUA NEW GUINEA	<input type="checkbox"/> SPAIN
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BANGLADESH	<input type="checkbox"/> CYPRUS	<input type="checkbox"/> HAITI	<input type="checkbox"/> MALAYSIA	<input type="checkbox"/> PARAGUAY	<input type="checkbox"/> SRI LANKA
<input type="checkbox"/> BARBADOS	<input type="checkbox"/> CZECH REPUBLIC	<input type="checkbox"/> HONDURAS	<input type="checkbox"/> MALDIVES	<input type="checkbox"/> PERU	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SUDAN
<input type="checkbox"/> BELARUS	<input type="checkbox"/> DEM PR OF KOREA	<input type="checkbox"/> HUNGARY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MALI	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILIPPINES	<input type="checkbox"/> SURINAME
<input type="checkbox"/> BELGIUM	<input type="checkbox"/> DEM REP OF THE C...	<input type="checkbox"/> ICELAND	<input type="checkbox"/> MALTA	<input type="checkbox"/> POLAND	<input type="checkbox"/> SWEDEN
<input type="checkbox"/> BELIZE	<input type="checkbox"/> DENMARK	<input type="checkbox"/> INDIA	<input type="checkbox"/> MARSHALL ISLANDS	<input type="checkbox"/> PORTUGAL	<input type="checkbox"/> SWITZERLAND
<input type="checkbox"/> BENIN	<input type="checkbox"/> DJIBOUTI	<input type="checkbox"/> INDONESIA	<input type="checkbox"/> MAURITANIA	<input type="checkbox"/> QATAR	<input type="checkbox"/> SYRIAN ARAB REP...
<input type="checkbox"/> BHUTAN	<input type="checkbox"/> DOMINICA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IRAN (ISLAMIC REP...)	<input type="checkbox"/> MAURITIUS	<input type="checkbox"/> REP OF KOREA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TAJIKISTAN
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BOLIVIA	<input type="checkbox"/> DOMINICAN REP...	<input type="checkbox"/> IRAQ	<input type="checkbox"/> MEXICO	<input type="checkbox"/> REP OF MOLDOVA	<input type="checkbox"/> THAILAND
<input type="checkbox"/> BOSNIA-HERZEGOV...	<input type="checkbox"/> ECUADOR	<input type="checkbox"/> IRELAND	<input type="checkbox"/> MICRONESIA (FS)	<input type="checkbox"/> ROMANIA	<input type="checkbox"/> THAILAND
<input type="checkbox"/> BOTSWANA	<input type="checkbox"/> EGYPT	<input type="checkbox"/> ISRAEL	<input type="checkbox"/> MONACO	<input type="checkbox"/> RUSSIAN FED...	<input type="checkbox"/> TIMOR-LESTE
<input type="checkbox"/> BRAZIL	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EL SALVADOR	<input type="checkbox"/> ITALY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MONGOLIA	<input type="checkbox"/> RWANDA	<input type="checkbox"/> TOGO
<input type="checkbox"/> BRUNEI DARUSSAL...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EQUATORIAL GUINEA	<input type="checkbox"/> JAMAICA	<input type="checkbox"/> MONTENEGRO	<input type="checkbox"/> SAINT KITTS-NEVIS	<input type="checkbox"/> TRINIDAD-TOBAGO
<input type="checkbox"/> BULGARIA	<input type="checkbox"/> ERITREA	<input type="checkbox"/> JAPAN	<input type="checkbox"/> MOROCCO	<input type="checkbox"/> SAINT LUCIA	<input type="checkbox"/> TUNISIA
<input type="checkbox"/> BURKINA FASO	<input type="checkbox"/> ESTONIA	<input type="checkbox"/> JORDAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MOZAMBIQUE	<input type="checkbox"/> SAINT VINCENT-GR...	<input type="checkbox"/> TURKEY
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BURUNDI	<input type="checkbox"/> ESWATINI	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> KAZAKHSTAN	<input type="checkbox"/> MYANMAR	<input type="checkbox"/> SAMOA	<input type="checkbox"/> TURKMENISTAN
<input type="checkbox"/> CABO VERDE	<input type="checkbox"/> ETHIOPIA	<input type="checkbox"/> KENYA	<input type="checkbox"/> MYANMAR	<input type="checkbox"/> SAN MARINO	<input type="checkbox"/> TUVALU
<input type="checkbox"/> CAMBODIA	<input type="checkbox"/> FIJI	<input type="checkbox"/> KIRIBATI	<input type="checkbox"/> NAURU	<input type="checkbox"/> SAO TOME-PRINCIPE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UGANDA
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN FAVOUR:141	<input type="checkbox"/> AGAINST:5			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ABSTENTION:35	

**UN General Assembly vote on resolution A/RES/ES-11/1 “Aggression against Ukraine”.**

Source: UN, www.un.org.

the so-called “Uniting for Peace” mechanism, which was initially used during the Korean War, when the Security Council was completely impaired. Accordingly, on 27 February 2022, the UN Security Council decided by a majority vote (11 in favour, one against (Russia) and three abstaining (China, India and the United Arab Emirates)) to convene an emergency special session of the General Assembly to examine the situation in Ukraine and propose collective action. This was the first time in 40 years that the Security Council adopted such a resolution based on the “Uniting for Peace” mechanism.

The resolution “Aggression against Ukraine”, adopted by the General Assembly on 2 March 2022 with 141 votes in favour, was seen as a historic step. The UN General Assembly reaffirmed its commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders, deplored in the strongest terms the aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine, and demanded that the Russian Federation immediately cease its use of force against Ukraine and refrain from any further unlawful threat or use of force. But what is the meaning, if any, of this resolution by the UN General Assembly regarding Russia’s aggression against Ukraine? And what are the expected political and legal consequences of the resolution? On the one hand, the adoption of the resolution is an important international signal. The resolution acknowledges that Russia has violated Article 2(4) of the UN Charter. This article sets out the principles

shared by all Member States, and Paragraph 4 explicitly stipulates that Member States shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.

Thus, this resolution has recognised Russia as an aggressor. The result of the vote clearly demonstrates Russia's international isolation due to its aggressive actions against Ukraine. The resolution was supported by 141 countries, with only five voting against it: Belarus, North Korea, Eritrea, Syria and Russia itself. UN General Assembly resolutions are not binding, but that does not mean that they are worthless. They play a crucial role in the consolidation of the international community and shaping public opinion. In case of international aggression, the unity of the international community is paramount, as a fragmented or ambiguous opinion will inevitably serve to encourage the aggressor.

In 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted four resolutions with a decisive majority; the first one demanded the immediate withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine, the second demanded access for humanitarian aid, the third suspended Russia's membership on the UN Human Rights Council, and the fourth expressed political support for the notion that Russia must reimburse all damages resulting from its aggression against Ukraine, recommending that these be documented in a register of damages expressly created for this purpose. Latvia

has taken a strong stand in support of the territorial integrity of Ukraine, and harshly condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine by supporting all of these resolutions. This emphasises its primary objective within international organisations which is the implementation and strengthening of an international order based on the principles of international law and the strengthening of multilateralism<sup>4</sup>. Latvia has also actively taken part in lobbying votes for the adoption of these resolutions .

In addition, the UN General Assembly adopted without a vote the Lichtenstein initiative "Standing mandate for a General Assembly debate when a veto is cast in the Security Council". This document stipulates that any use of the veto in the Security Council will automatically trigger a meeting of the General Assembly where all UN Member States will be able to ask questions of the country that cast the veto and provide their comments. Thus, UN Security Council members who use the veto (only three of the five, as France and the UK refrain from using

---

The resolution "Aggression against Ukraine", adopted by the General Assembly on 2 March 2022 with 141 votes in favour, was seen as a historic step.

---

---

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the Annual Report of the Minister of Foreign Affairs on the accomplishments and further work with respect to national foreign policy and the European Union 2021, <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/media/5240/download?attachment>

theirs) will be obliged to substantiate and explain their decision to the UN General Assembly.

Yet the international community may rightfully ask: if the UN Security Council (and not the General Assembly) is the main organ to which the Charter has bestowed exclusive responsibility for maintaining peace and security, and if decisions of the General Assembly are not legally binding, what would this increased role mean? The International Court of Justice has noted that the UN Charter confers to the Security Council primary, but not exclusive, responsibility over matters of international peace and security, and the General Assembly, despite its involvement in this area, “absolute and complete lack of competence to resort to measures involving the use of armed force.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is difficult to give a strict answer as to whether the “Uniting for Peace” mechanism can be considered as a viable and effective tool for regulating crises and conflicts.

Alongside strengthening the role of the UN General Assembly, reforms aimed at improving the working methods of the Security Council have been relatively successful. As any changes to the composition or veto rights of the Security Council are, for all intents and purposes, impossible, these reforms have mainly been focused on making the informal working methods of the institution more inclusive and transparent. This includes urging the permanent members of the Security Council to work together with the elected members by holding meetings and jointly drafting resolutions. In turn, the elected members are urged to come together for the purpose of furthering regional priorities. These reforms also call for expanding the range of thematic issues examined in the Security Council (such as humanitarian and human security issues) and expanding the Council’s cooperation network to include regional, sub-regional and civil society organisations.

A group of like-minded countries has been established at the UN – the ACT Group<sup>6</sup> works to improve the accountability, coherence and transparency of the UN Security Council. Latvia is a member of this group. One of the goals of the ACT Group is to strengthen unity among states regardless of their status within the UN Security Council and to improve the working methods of the Security Council. These are, of course, much smaller steps than are necessary to overhaul the Council. However, the ACT Group has played a crucial role regarding two initiatives. First, a voluntary Code of Conduct, wherein the permanent members of the Security Council are urged to refrain from casting their veto on issues pertaining to mass crimes, genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. More than 120 UN Member States have joined this initiative, including two of the Big Five

<sup>5</sup> Benedetti Conforti, *The Law and Practice of the United Nations* (Legal Aspects of International Organization, Third Edition. Volume 42) (Leiden, Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2005), 221.

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, “Factsheet – The Accountability, Coherence and Transparency (ACT) Group – Better Working Methods for today’s UN Security Council,” May 2019, accessed 21.08.2024, <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/media/1609/download>.



countries (France and the United Kingdom). Second, the decision to convene the UN General Assembly in the event of a veto being cast in the Security Council. To a certain extent, this has reinforced the role of the General Assembly on issues relating to peace and security around the world.

## To conclude

An “all or nothing” mindset is not helpful for reforming the UN Security Council. Neither is getting bogged down in predictably unproductive criticism of veto rights without seeking other means of improving the work and working methods of the Security Council. We must keep in mind that as the only global organisation, the United Nations is the core of multilateralism, bringing together all sovereign states. The international system is still based on the sovereignty of states, the sovereign equality of states, non-interference in internal matters, the territorial integrity of states, the peaceful resolution of conflicts and adherence to the principles of international law.

The collective will and efforts of the democratic world need to be aimed at strengthening the UN rather than undermining it, criticising it endlessly or withdrawing from. The solutions lie within our own hands. Should the democratic world fail to succeed in this, we may soon find ourselves not only with an organisation whose principles have been distorted and whose agenda is governed by authoritarian regimes but also living in a world governed by the rule of power.

It is precisely this reason that makes Latvia’s candidacy for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council at this time more significant, as the institution is severely paralysed. Membership of this institution will provide Latvia with an opportunity to defend the rules-based international order and democratic values, solidify its own international standing and gain strength, and spotlight topical issues of regional security. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has illuminated in frightening clarity the security issues faced by the Euro-Atlantic area and the world at large. Latvia will take a strict stand on prioritising the rules-based international order during its campaign if elected as a member of the UN Security Council. Let us recall the famous words of Madeleine Albright: “If the UN didn’t exist, we would invent it.” We must keep in mind that today, even in the boldest of scenarios, it would not be possible to create such an organisation. All efforts to reinforce the rules-based international order and protect human rights and the principles of democracy bring us closer to overcoming the limitations of the UN and realising its full inner potential. The United Nations is and will continue to be only as effective as its Member States want it to be. This is of particular importance to smaller states, including Latvia.

Mārtiņš Paparinskis

## The Future of International Law

Just like the future in general, the future of international law is not easily predictable. The one thing that is clear is that the future of international law is a never-ending work-in-progress that will always and inevitably produce a variety of answers.<sup>1</sup> I doubt that is any surprise. Just as with any other area of law, international law contains the intrinsically unsolvable dilemma of legal norms and the flow of time: how is it possible to rigidify desired regulations appropriate to the prevailing public opinion whilst also allowing for adjustments in public opinion, and consequently legal regulations, in the future? Assumptions about the direction in which society – the community, the *politeia* – will develop play a crucial role in this discussion, and, as such, this is a matter that also goes at least partially beyond a legal question.

The dilemma may seem even more complicated in international law. In contrast to the majority of national legal systems, as international law is decentralised and based on the principle of the sovereign equality of states. For this reason, it is even more difficult for the international community to agree on fundamental issues pertaining to international law and the international structure, which are not examined regularly, but rather at extraordinary moments and historic turning points, such as the Congress of Vienna in the 19th century or the Conferences of Versailles or San Francisco in the 20th century. In this essay, I will outline my vision of the future of international law as I see it in the summer of 2024 by first taking a brief look at the past and present of international law to then formulate several questions that I believe worthy of consideration in deliberations about the future.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sal. Alejandro Alvarez, *Le droit international de l'avenir* (Washington: Institut Americain de Droit International, 1916); Richard Falk, "The Future of International Law," *Proceedings of the ASIL Annual Meeting* 75, 1981: 8–14; Mohammed Bedjaoui et Hubert Thierry, "Avenir du droit international," en *Droit international: Bilan et perspectives*, ed. M. Bedjaoui (Paris: Editions A. Pedone, UNESCO 1991), 1305–1317; William W. Burke-White and Anne-Marie Slaughter, "The Future of International Law is Domestic (or, The European Way of Law)" *Harvard International Law Journal* 327, no. 47 (2006): 327–352; Joel P. Trachtman, *The Future of International Law: Global Government* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); Douglas Guilfoyle, "The Future of International Law in an Authoritarian World," June 3, 2019, accessed 14.08.2024., <https://www.ejiltalk.org/the-future-of-international-law-in-an-authoritarian-world/>; Daniel Bethlehem, "Project 2100: Looking Back, Looking Forward: A 2020's Perspective on the International Legal Order," November 14, 2023, accessed 14.08.2024., <https://www.twentyessex.com/project-2100-looking-back-looking-forward-a-2020sperspective-on-the-international-legal-order/>.

## Past, present, future

International law has a lengthy history (just as the history of international law does).<sup>2</sup> Interactions between different communities organised in different ways, especially regarding encounters in geographically remote situations as a result of seafaring,<sup>3</sup> have for a long time given rise to the question of what rules and norms constitute a legal framework, particularly in relation to settling disputes and disagreements. Different communities, regions and philosophers have produced different answers to these questions. In this essay, the intellectual focus will be on the historical understanding of that body of international law that has served as the reference for contemporary international law. These sources are most certainly rooted in Europe, even if there is room for the rational argument of whether the source of this understanding is to be sought in relations between city-states in early Renaissance Italy (as it would seem to me<sup>4</sup>), in a more inclusive interaction between states in the broader Mediterranean region<sup>5</sup> or even the Peace of Westphalia of the 17th century (as per the traditional view).

At the same time, the broader context is useful in musing over the future of international law. It is crucial to understand that accepting European international law at a universal level – the “globalisation of international law” – went hand in hand with the geographical consolidation of European political, economic and military influence from the 16th century onwards.<sup>6</sup> That is to say, contemporary international law remains, in many crucial aspects, historically contingent. With comparatively minute alterations in the flow of the history of the world, instead of a secular international community consisting of equal states, our reference point might easily have been states with a common religious bond<sup>7</sup> or one hierarchically higher state to which others pay various forms of dues.<sup>8</sup> If contemporary international law is contingent on certain key historical and political aspects, there is no reason to assume that future adjustments will be any less radical.

---

<sup>2</sup> Randall Lesaffer and Anne Peters (eds), *The Cambridge History of International Law*, Volume I: The Historiography of International Law (Cambridge University Press, 2024, forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> David Abulafia, *The Boundless Sea: The Human History of the Oceans* (Penguin, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Angelo Piero Sereni, “Italy’s Contribution to International Law During the Renaissance,” in *The Italian Conception of International Law* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 118–124.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Ago, “The First International Communities in the Mediterranean World,” *British Year Book of International Law* 213, vol. 53 (1982): 213–232, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bybil/53.1.197>.

<sup>6</sup> Gerry Simpson, “The Globalisation of International Law,” in *Globalisation of International Society*, eds. T. Dunne, C. Reus-Smit, (Oxford University Press, 2017), 265–283, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198793427.003.0014>.

<sup>7</sup> International Court of Justice, “Western Sahara (Advisory Opinion of 16 October, 1975),” paragraph 95, accessed 14.08.2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/61/061-19751016-ADV-01-00-EN.pdf> (“the Dar al-Islam, as Morocco itself pointed out in its oral statement, knows and then knew separate States within the common religious bond of Islam”).

<sup>8</sup> Yuen Foong Khoong, “The American Tributary System,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 1 (Spring 2013): 1–47, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pot002>.

In international law, the line between past and present is to be drawn cautiously. I have already mentioned several historic turning points, usually taking the form of interstate conferences, wherein the time and place of new interpretations coming into being are easily identifiable. Yet on other issues, historical experience is largely inherited – for instance, diplomatic law, which can be traced back to the aforementioned Italian city-states, or the law of war, the depiction of which in Shakespeare’s plays often deals with modern-day problems.<sup>9</sup> As a member of the UN International Law Commission (ILC), I often ponder the role of international organisations in the evolution of international law, and therefore, in this essay, I will draw the line between past and present at the founding of the first universal organisation – the League of Nations – in 1920. Drawing a line between the present and the future is a simpler task – that being the time of writing this essay: late summer 2024.

## The past

International law prior to the League of Nations is curiously familiar and also oddly foreign. Lawyers specialising in international law are exceedingly familiar with the contribution of the 20th century to the evolution of contemporary international law, as well as that of 17th and 18th century scholars (such as Francisco Suárez, Hugo Grotius and Emerich de Vattel). The 19th century is a different story: it is far removed both from modern-day practices and the great minds of times past.<sup>10</sup> I believe that this amnesia of the past in international law can be explained by the fact that international law in the 19th and 20th century employed similar terminology with occasionally identical, but often times radically different, substance and applicability.

Who were the main actors in international law in the 19th century? States who placed a particular emphasis on their sovereignty and mutual equality, much akin to the contemporary mindset. However, the number of these states was modest, and even more modest were the opportunities of less influential states to take part in the development of international law. A fitting example is the Hague Peace Conference of 1899, which can be considered to be the institution most similar to the universal international organisations of the modern day. This Conference consisted of only 22 states: apart from European countries and the United States, invitations were also extended to Türkiye, three Asian states (Japan, China and Siam, today Thailand) and one country from Latin America (Mexico). No countries from Africa were present at the Conference.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, international law permitted various hierarchies

---

<sup>9</sup> Theodor Meron, *Henry’s Wars and Shakespeare’s Laws* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> David W. Kennedy, “International Law and the Nineteenth Century: History of an Illusion,” 65 *Nordic Journal of International Law* 385 (1996): 385–420.

<sup>11</sup> James Brown Scott (ed.), *The Proceedings of the Hague Peace Conference: The Conference of 1899* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1920), 7.



**Kristīne Līce, Legislation and International Law Adviser to the President of Latvia, presenting oral arguments at the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea in Case No.31 “Request for an Advisory Opinion Submitted by the Commission of Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law”, 15 September 2023.** Source: website of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS.org)

and divisions. Even though Japan, China and Türkiye were invited to take part in the Hague Conference, European countries and the United States rejected the notion that these countries belonged to the same form of civilisation as themselves, and for that reason demanded that they conclude agreements on the “consular jurisdiction”, according to which the legislation of these countries would not apply to the citizens of the other signatory (with this, naturally, not being a reciprocal measure). International law also did not preclude other means of states exerting control beyond their territory, including in their colonies and protectorates, and it essentially contained little legal regulation of the right to use military force.

It is important to note that the international law of the 19th century was not at all primitive in a technical sense. International law, and international treaties in particular, were of great significance in international relations, including in regard to crucial issues of international peace and security.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, those shaping international law opted to interpret the matter of the ideal model for the legal regulation of international relations in a manner that differs from our contemporary practice. Conceptually, answers to questions raised in international relations were viewed through the prism of bilateral and unilateral legal arguments. This paved the

<sup>12</sup> Alan J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848–1918* (Oxford University Press, 1954).

way to creating international organisations for the resolution of specific issues, such as joint commissions on transboundary waters or specialised organisations in areas such as postal services. However, states did not see any need to establish a permanent international universal organisation or elaborate regulations in areas that were not of direct consequence to the laws or legal interests of other states. It is therefore no surprise that this version of international law provided detailed regulation of interstate relations within the law of war<sup>13</sup>, regulation of state accountability for damages caused to foreign citizens and their property<sup>14</sup>, and regulation of dispute settlement between states in courts of arbitration<sup>15</sup>, but not regulation of issues that did not have a direct impact on the interests of other states, such as rules for civil war, human rights or environmental protection.

## The present

The time period of the present spans from 1920 until the moment of the writing of this essay. International law has undergone substantial change in the last 100 years, and in the following paragraphs I will note four assertions that would be particularly surprising to an international lawyer having entered a time machine in 1919 and now leafing through a 2024 textbook on international law.

The first change relates specifically to international lawyers. Over the course of the last 100 years, significant strides have been made in the understanding of the fundamental principles of international law. This has been influenced by experts (especially the United Nations ILC) and states (particularly in the framework of international organisations), as well as international courts and courts of arbitration (especially the International Court of Justice). In 1970, the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States.<sup>16</sup> Today, there is a much clearer understanding of the sources of international law, as indicated in

---

<sup>13</sup> Institut de Droit International, “Devoirs internationaux des Etats neutres: Regles de Washington,” La Haye, 1875, skatits 15.08.2024., <https://www.idi-iil.org/fr/sessions/the-hague-1875>; Institut de Droit International, “Traitement de la propriété privée dans la guerre maritime,” La Haye, 1875, accessed 15.08.2024, <https://www.idi-iil.org/fr/sessions/the-hague-1875>; Institut de Droit International, “Examen de la Déclaration de Bruxelles de 1874,” La Haye, 1875, accessed 15.08.2024., <https://www.idi-iil.org/fr/sessions/the-hague-1875>.

<sup>14</sup> Edwin M. Borchard, *Diplomatic Protection of Citizens Abroad: or the Law of International Claims* (The Banks Law Publishing Company, 1915).

<sup>15</sup> Institut de Droit International, “Projet de reglement pour la procédure arbitrale internationale,” La Haye, 1875, accessed 15.08.2024, <https://www.idi-iil.org/fr/sessions/the-hague-1875>.

<sup>16</sup> UN General Assembly, “Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations,” United Nations Digital Library, accessed 15.08.2024, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/202170?ln=en&v=pdf>. See Jorge E. Vinuales (ed.), *The UN Friendly Relations Declaration at 50: An Assessment of the Fundamental Principles of International Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).



**The closing of the 2024 session of the UN International Law Commission. Professor Mārtiņš Paparinskis, First Vice-Chair, pictured first row, fourth from the left, 2 August 2024.** Photo: personal archives of Marcelo Vázquez-Bermúdez, Chair of the International Law Commission

the 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties<sup>17</sup>, the 2018 ILC conclusions on identification of customary international law<sup>18</sup>, and the 2023 ILC Draft conclusions on general principles of law.<sup>19</sup> The 2001 ILC articles on the responsibility of states for internationally wrongful acts provide a framework and added clarity on the options and rights that states possess to react to such acts.<sup>20</sup> To non-specialists of international law, these examples may seem technical and even somewhat tedious – however, the “rules on rules” are of monumental importance in international practice, especially as it pertains to the international response to the aggression started in 2022 by the Russian Federation against Ukraine.<sup>21</sup>

The second change is more conspicuous: [the creation of] international intergovernmental organisations, without which contemporary international law and relations are unimaginable. We regularly see mention of these in front-page news: the League of Nations (in the period between World War I and World War II), now

<sup>17</sup> United Nations, “Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties,” United Nations Treaty Series 1155 (1969): 331, accessed 15.08.2024, [https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/1\\_1\\_1969.pdf](https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/1_1_1969.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> United Nations, “Draft Conclusions on Identification of Customary International Law, with commentaries,” accessed 15.08.2024, [https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/commentaries/1\\_13\\_2018.pdf](https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/commentaries/1_13_2018.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> United Nations, International Law Commission, “Chapter IV: General Principles of Law,” 2023, 40, accessed 15.08.2024, <https://legal.un.org/ilc/reports/2023/english/chp4.pdf> [40].

<sup>20</sup> United Nations, “Draft articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts, with commentaries,” accessed 15.08.2024, [https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/commentaries/9\\_6\\_2001.pdf](https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/commentaries/9_6_2001.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> See. Mārtiņš Paparinskis, “Discussion on Compensation under International Law with a Focus on Options for Enforcement of Payments Awarded by International Human Rights Courts,” CAHDI, 11 April 2024, accessed 15.08.2024, <https://rm.coe.int/martins-paparinskis-66th-cahdi/1680af7111>.

succeeded by the United Nations as a universal organisation open to all states and possessing a broad mandate; the various specialised organisations related to the UN, e.g., the International Labour Organisation or the World Health Organisation; regional organisations such as the Council of Europe, the Organisation of American States, the African Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); various regional organisations for economic integration, with the European Union being the most deeply integrated one; and a great variety of specialised organisations, from the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the World Bank to the International Criminal Court (ICC). In short, the evolution of international relations and international law to a great extent takes place within these international organisations, not to mention

---

The sources of international law are open to any content that states – or any other entity shaping international law – may opt to provide.

---

less formal means of international cooperation involving not only states (and other international organisations) but also non-governmental organisations. As a result, international law is more dynamic, whilst also being much more complicated, especially in comparison to the 19th century international law scene, which was dominated by several dozen states.

The third difference between 1920 and 2024 is the expression of international law in the form of international treaties in traditionally familiar areas and their simultaneous application

to new aspects. For example, the international law of war was already regulated by regulations concerning the laws and customs of war<sup>22</sup> that were adopted as part of the Hague Convention (II), while modern humanitarian law is, to a large extent, contained in the considerably more intricate norms of the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1979 Additional Protocols.<sup>23</sup> The long-established law of the sea is now largely laid out in the monumental United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 1982.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, long-standing diplomatic and consular laws have been codified (recorded in writing) in the Vienna Conventions, on the basis of drafts by the ILC, subsequently broadly ratified by States.<sup>25</sup> Significant evolution has also been seen in

---

<sup>22</sup> International Humanitarian Law Databases, “Convention (IV) respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land. The Hague, 18 October 1907,” accessed 15.08.2024, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/hagueconv-iv-1907>. See also resolutions of the International Institute of Law, no. 13.

<sup>23</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, “The Geneva Conventions and their Commentaries,” accessed 15.08.2024, <https://www.icrc.org/en/law-and-policy/geneva-conventions-and-their-commentaries>.

<sup>24</sup> United Nations, “United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982,” accessed 15.08.2024, [https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention\\_agreements/texts/unclos/UNCLOS-TOC.htm](https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/UNCLOS-TOC.htm).

<sup>25</sup> International Law Commission, “Diplomatic intercourse and immunities,” accessed 15.08.2024, 2024, [https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/9\\_1.shtml](https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/9_1.shtml); International Law Commission, “Consular intercourse and immunities,” accessed 15.08.2024, [https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/9\\_2.shtml](https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/9_2.shtml).



other areas, reflecting shifts in conceptual perspectives or technical and scientific development. International criminal law, inspired in great part by the Judgement of the Nuremberg International Military Tribunal and post-war case-law in a broader sense, is today contained in numerous key international treaties, the central one being the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.<sup>26</sup> Other areas are entirely new: international human rights dates back only to the 1940s, international space law was established in the 1960s, and international environmental law is from the 1980s, just to name a few examples. To reiterate the point made before: in the 20th century, states opted for a different model of legal regulation of relations, which, in contrast to the prevailing mindsets of the 19th century, relied significantly more on international law in general and its multilateral elements in particular.

The fourth aspect has already been alluded to in previous paragraphs, but it is worth highlighting it explicitly – namely, the explosion in terms of the quantity and quality of international justice that has occurred over the last 30 years. Case in point: the aforementioned ICJ, which satiated itself in the 1970s on a rather bland diet of cases<sup>27</sup>, is currently examining 23 cases relating to many of the hottest political disputes featured in front-page news.<sup>28</sup> This intensity is not unique, as the

---

<sup>26</sup> Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, [https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.1\\_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> International Court of Justice, “List of All Cases,” accessed 15.08.2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/list-of-all-cases>.

<sup>28</sup> International Court of Justice, “Alleged Violations of the 1955 Treaty of Amity, Economic Relations, and Consular Rights (Iran v. US) (Preliminary objections),” 2021, ICJ Rep 9, accessed 15.08.2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/175/175-20210203-JUD-01-00-EN.pdf>; International Court of Justice, “Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (The Gambia v. Myanmar) (Preliminary objections),” 2022, ICJ Rep 477, accessed 15.08.2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/178/178-20220722-jud-01-00-en.pdf>; International Court of Justice, “Application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Armenia v. Azerbaijan) (Order of 17 November 2023),” 2023, accessed 15.08.2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/180/180-20231117-ord-01-00-en.pdf>; International Court of Justice, “Arbitral Award of 3 October 1899 (Guyana v. Venezuela) (Order of 1 December 2023),” 2023, accessed 15.08.2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/171/171-20231201-ord-01-00-en.pdf>; International Court of Justice, “Obligations of States in respect of Climate Change (Request for an Advisory Opinion) (Order of 15 December 2023),” 2023, accessed 15.08.2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/187/187-20230420-ORD-01-00-EN.pdf>; International Court of Justice, “Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel) (Order of 26 January 2024),” 2024, accessed 15.08.2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20240126-ord-01-00-en.pdf>; International Court of Justice, “Allegations of Genocide under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Ukraine v. Russian Federation: 32 States intervening) (Preliminary objections),” 2024, accessed 15.08.2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/182/182-20240202-jud-01-00-en.pdf>; International Court of Justice, “Legal Consequences arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem (Advisory Opinion),” 2024, accessed 15.08.2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/186/186-20240719-adv-01-00-en.pdf>.



**The 2023–2027 composition of the International Law Commission. Author of this essay pictured first row, fifth from the left.** Photo: Website of the International Law Commission ([legal.un.org](http://legal.un.org))

dispute-settlement mechanisms of international arbitration<sup>29</sup>, the law of the sea<sup>30</sup> and the WTO<sup>31</sup>, as well as the ICC<sup>32</sup> – not to mention the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes<sup>33</sup> and courts of regional human rights and economic organisations – have likewise become of crucial importance. The shadow cast by legal proceedings alters the dynamics of international law and relations, assigning more meaning to formal legal arguments and independent arbiters. While this may be either an advantage or disadvantage depending on the dispute at hand, it is most certainly a contrast to the historical interpretation (and even that of the 1990s) of the role of international law in international relations. In seeking the international rule of law, the first thing found, albeit perhaps unwittingly, is the rule of lawyers.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Permanent Court of Arbitration for the Law of the Sea, “Cases,” accessed 15.08.2024, <https://pca-cpa.org/en/cases/>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.; International Tribunal, “Cases,” accessed 15.08.2024, <https://www.itlos.org/en/main/cases/>; accessed August 15, 2024.

<sup>31</sup> World Trade Organization, “Dispute Settlement,” accessed 15.08.2024, [https://www.wto.org/english/tratop\\_e/dispu\\_e/dispu\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/dispu_e/dispu_e.htm).

<sup>32</sup> International Criminal Court, accessed 15.08.2024, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/>.

<sup>33</sup> International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes, accessed 15.08.2024, <https://icsid.worldbank.org/>.

<sup>34</sup> “Juridification is a package deal. It includes the Rule of Law but also the Rule of Lawyers.” - Joseph H. H. Weiler, “The Rule of Lawyers and the Ethos of Diplomats: Reflections on the Internal and External Legitimacy of WTO Dispute Settlement,” accessed 15.08.2024, <https://jeanmonnetprogram.org/archive/papers/00/000901-03.html#TopOfPage>.



Professor Mārtiņš Paparinskis, First Vice-Chair and Acting Chair, and Nawaf Salam, President of the International Court of Justice, at the session of the UN International Law Commission, 17 July 2024.

Photo from personal archives

## The future

The wholeness of the legal system. International organisations. Clearer legal regulation in existing areas and expansion into new ones. International courts (and lawyers). Previously, I outlined four things that would seem most surprising to an international lawyer transported to modern times from 1919. Taking these four elements as points of reference, what surprises might be in store for us in the international law of 2100? Before we start looking at answers, I would be remiss if I did not remind the reader that the following are my humble musings based on my perspective as a scholar and practitioner of international law, without any claim to superior knowledge as to more global trends in international relations.

How might the fundamental elements of international law be altered in the future? Some basic concepts of international law will most likely remain unchanged. The sources of international law are open to any content that states – or any other entity shaping international law – may opt to provide. Modern international treaty law is, to a great extent, stipulated by the Vienna Convention adopted back in 1969, which is applied in practice even by countries that are not formal signatories (e.g., the United States, France and Norway). Some have attributed the enduring intransigence of the *Satversme* (Constitution) of Latvia to its original language of essential neutrality regarding policies to be elaborated within the constitutional framework. International treaties and customary international law are also considerably agnostic as to the substance of the choices made by states, with some rare exceptions

(e.g., the rights of third countries and the peremptory norms of general international law (*jus cogens*)). If the international law formulated in 1969 is good enough for parties signing treaties in 2024, then it is likely to also withstand the test of the next 55 years.

Other key elements of international law have also laid roots in practice and mindsets, and they are likely to retain their substance and meaning, but it is also not beyond the realm of possibility that emphases may shift back towards greater alignment with 19th-century interpretations. For example: will the international law of the future focus on bilateral or genuinely multilateral aspects? What will be the role and meaning of peremptory norms (*jus cogens*), from which states cannot derogate based on mutual agreement and which permit the establishment of claims in the name of general interest (*erga omnes*), such as the prohibition of genocide and other international crimes? Discussions over the 2022 Draft Conclusions of the ILC on *jus cogens*<sup>35</sup>, which took place in the Sixth Committee of the UN General Assembly in 2022 and 2023, illustrated the difference in emphases within the attitudes of different countries.<sup>36</sup> It is possible to imagine a system of international law that is internally consistent and sophisticated, and developed enough, while also being completely based on the protection of the individual rather than collective interests, as was the case in the 19th century. Such a system would take a conservative approach to, say, *erga omnes* claims against breaches of human rights in the absence of individual violations, as in the cases based on the Genocide Convention currently before the ICJ.<sup>37</sup> An even more sensitive issue is whether international law could recognise the special interests and rights of certain influential states in a specific region, similarly to the 19th century Monroe Doctrine regarding the U.S.'s sphere of influence in America. Professor Vaughan Lowe has noted that the regional practices of some states could be interpreted as attempts to include such arguments into international legal norms, constituting a departure from the principle of sovereign equality which is of central importance in contemporary international law.<sup>38</sup>

How could the role of international organisations in international law change in the future? This question is closely related to broader trends in international

<sup>35</sup> United Nations, "Draft Conclusions on Identification and Legal Consequences of Peremptory Norms of General International Laws (*jus cogens*), with commentaries," accessed 15.08.2024, 2024, [https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/commentaries/1\\_14\\_2022.pdf](https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/commentaries/1_14_2022.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> United Nations, "Peremptory norms of general international law (*jus cogens*). UNGA Res 78/109," 11 December 2023, accessed 15.08.2024, [https://legal.un.org/ilc/guide/1\\_14.shtml](https://legal.un.org/ilc/guide/1_14.shtml). See discussion: Matúš Košuth, "Statement by Mr. Matúš Košuth coordinator of the draft resolution on „Identification and legal consequences of peremptory norms of general international law (*jus cogens*)" (item 77)", accessed 15.08.2024, [https://www.un.org/en/ga/sixth/77/pdfs/statements/ilc/36mtg\\_slovakia\\_jus-cogens.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/ga/sixth/77/pdfs/statements/ilc/36mtg_slovakia_jus-cogens.pdf); United Nations, "Sixth Committee (Legal) – 78th session," accessed 15.08.2024, <https://www.un.org/en/ga/sixth/78/ilc.shtml>.

<sup>37</sup> International Court of Justice, "The Gambia v. Myanmar," n. 28, Dissenting Opinion of Judge Xue 520; International Court of Justice, "South Africa v. Israel," n. 28.

<sup>38</sup> Vaughan Lowe, "The Limits of the Law", *The Hague Academy Collected Courses Online / Recueil des cours de l'Académie de La Haye en ligne* 379, 15 (2016), 33.

relations. States and other actors within international relations may decide to join or withdraw from international organisations (or expel other members), just as they may establish new organisations or dissolve existing ones. While legal arguments are of consequence here, they mostly only come into play at the level of legal technicalities. Looking at organisations from a systemic point of view, their future prospects give rise to four questions.

First: what will the role of the UN be, particularly regarding international peace and security (in relation to which the norms and institutions of modern international law are stipulated in the UN Charter, the effectuality of which, and especially the capacity of the Security Council, are often criticised)? Second: what will the balance between the UN family of international organisations and regional and other specialised organisations be? Third: are conventional, rather formal international organisations suited to modern-day challenges, particularly in view of technological development, or would a more informal cooperation with non-governmental organisations, entrepreneurs and experts be more appropriate? Fourth: how will international organisations be affected by states potentially more critical of democracy?<sup>39</sup> I contend that the UN will maintain its unique role as the sole international organisation of universal scale. That does not, however, mean that it will be the one to decide all issues of significance. Various regional and specialised organisations, including those that go beyond the formal framework of international organisations, will play an increasingly important role, especially in the event of the UN failing to provide solutions appropriate and acceptable to all.

What might the future contribute in the way of the substance of international law? Here, it would be germane to recall the previous point that in some areas, international law may evolve rather smoothly, whereas in other areas, conceptually different solutions may be opted for or new challenges may be addressed, thus it is difficult to generalise trends. For instance, the ILC is currently working with conventional fundamental issues of international law (general principles of law)<sup>40</sup> and issues that have long since been established in practice (the immunity of state officials<sup>41</sup>, the settlement of

---

Various regional and specialised organisations, including those that go beyond the formal framework of international organisations, will play an increasingly important role.

---

<sup>39</sup> Tom Ginsburg, "Authoritarian International Law," *American Journal of International Law* 114(2) (2020): 221–226.

<sup>40</sup> International Law Commission, "General Principles of Law," accessed 15.08.2024, [https://legal.un.org/ilc/guide/1\\_15.shtml](https://legal.un.org/ilc/guide/1_15.shtml).

<sup>41</sup> International Law Commission, "Immunity of State Officials from Foreign Criminal Jurisdiction," accessed 15.08.2024, [https://legal.un.org/ilc/guide/4\\_2.shtml](https://legal.un.org/ilc/guide/4_2.shtml).

disputes between international organisations<sup>42</sup>, and non-binding agreements<sup>43</sup>), but it is concurrently also working on the relatively new issue of how rising sea levels impact the law of the sea, statehood and human rights.<sup>44</sup> It would be safe to assume that international attention at the global level will be centred on environmental protection, e.g., the Agreement on Marine Biodiversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction<sup>45</sup> adopted in 2023, and on contemporary technological challenges, e.g., in relation to cyber security.<sup>46</sup> In short, I would expect to see an updating of traditional themes, as well as a juridification of new and as of yet unforeseeable themes.

What role will international courts play in international law? In teaching a master's programme on international dispute settlement, for the past 10 years I have started the first class of my course with the assertion that never before have international courts been so important, but they have also never before been as ardently criticised. This assertion has been justified year after year. I already mentioned the involvement of the ICJ in settling important disputes, both in relation to peace and security and possible human rights violations, as well as climate change issues. Matters of similar importance are being examined by other courts and courts of arbitration as well. This popularity of courts is a relatively recent development, and it is currently not entirely clear if it is based on trust in the legitimacy of judicial institutions or on the failures of other international institutions. A more definitive answer should be produced in the future.

## Latvia's place in the future of international law

What is Latvia's role in the future of international law? International law is an immense and complex field which may be examined from different perspectives. To my mind, for a country like Latvia, applying and supporting international law (using the opportunities it provides) is both the right and the smart choice. International legal arguments tend to more often play in favour of small states than references to justice or military or economic influence. Therefore, supporting the international rule of law is a pragmatically smart choice. Of course, international law will not

---

<sup>42</sup> International Law Commission, "Settlement of Disputes to Which International Organizations are Parties," accessed 15.08.2024, [https://legal.un.org/ilc/guide/10\\_3.shtml](https://legal.un.org/ilc/guide/10_3.shtml).

<sup>43</sup> International Law Commission, "Non-legally Binding International Agreements," accessed 15.08.2024, [https://legal.un.org/ilc/guide/1\\_17.shtml](https://legal.un.org/ilc/guide/1_17.shtml).

<sup>44</sup> International Law Commission, "Sea-level Rise in Relation to International Law," accessed 15.08.2024, [https://legal.un.org/ilc/guide/8\\_9.shtml](https://legal.un.org/ilc/guide/8_9.shtml).

<sup>45</sup> United Nations, "Agreement on Marine Biodiversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction," accessed 15.08.2024, <https://www.un.org/bbnjagreement/en>.

<sup>46</sup> United Nations, "Ad Hoc Committee to Elaborate a Comprehensive International Convention on Countering the Use of Information and Communications Technologies for Criminal Purposes," accessed 15.08.2024, [https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/cybercrime/ad\\_hoc\\_committee/home](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/cybercrime/ad_hoc_committee/home).

always and inevitably be favourable, but it will often be more so than other avenues. And what is absolutely certain is that arguments based in the rule of law are systemically more favourable for Latvia than any possible alternative, as was vividly proven by the country's experience in the previous century. In recent years, Latvia has taken several important steps, having recognised the compulsory jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice in 2019<sup>47</sup> and taken part, for the very first time, in an oral process at the International Tribunal for Law of the Sea<sup>48</sup> and at the ICJ in 2023<sup>49</sup>. My sincere hope would be that this perspective and approach be maintained in future as well.

---

<sup>47</sup> Declarations recognizing the jurisdiction of the Court as compulsory: Latvia, Republic of (24 September 2019). <https://www.icj-cij.org/declarations/lv>.

<sup>48</sup> International Tribunal for Law of the Sea, "Request for an Advisory Opinion submitted by the Commission of Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law (Request for Advisory Opinion submitted to the Tribunal)," ITLOS/PV.23/C31/9, accessed 15.08.2024, <https://www.itlos.org/en/main/cases/list-of-cases/request-for-an-advisory-opinion-submitted-by-the-commission-of-small-island-states-on-climate-change-and-international-law-request-for-advisory-opinion-submitted-to-the-tribunal/>.

<sup>49</sup> International Court of Justice, "Ukraine v. Russia: 32 States Intervening".

# About the Authors

## **Alise Balode**

Alise Balode holds a bachelor's degree in political science and international relations and a master's degree in law from the University of Latvia; she is also a qualified lawyer. She also holds a master's degree in European Union law from the University of Nancy in France. Ms Balode has been in the diplomatic service since 1996, and at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs she has mostly worked with EU affairs: she was involved in Latvia's EU accession negotiations, chaired the working group of lawyers drafting the accession treaty, and served as EU Affairs Adviser to two prime ministers while Latvia was in the process of joining the euro area and during Latvia's Presidency of the Council of the EU. Ms Balode has worked at Latvia's Permanent Representation to the EU in Brussels, where she served as First Secretary and Deputy Ambassador-Permanent Representative. Having held the position of Head of the Economic Relations, Trade and Development Cooperation Directorate at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in the autumn of 2024 she was appointed Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Latvia to the French Republic and the International Organisation of La Francophonie.

## **Ance Baura**

Ance Baura holds a bachelor's degree in political science and a master's degree in diplomacy from the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Latvia. She studied at the University of Tartu for one semester, and in 2023 she graduated from a study course on negotiation at the Davis Centre of Harvard University. She has been working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia since 2014. In 2015, Ms Baura spent a year working as a research assistant at the Centre for European Policy Analysis in Washington, D.C. through the Baltic-American Freedom Foundation's Professional Internship Programme. In 2019, she started working at Latvia's Permanent Mission to the UN in New York, where she served as an election expert and political coordinator until August 2023. During this time, she accumulated extensive experience on international electoral affairs and the work of the UN Security Council. She is currently Head of the International Organisations Division at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



**Anete Biķe**

Anete Biķe is a graduate of the International Baccalaureate programme at Riga State Gymnasium No 1. She has been actively involved in socio-political events as a volunteer, an avid debater and debate judge, an ambassador of the Youth Parliament in Latvia, and a member of the Isaiah Berlin Association of Latvia. Having studied at the Paris Institute of Political Studies in France and George Washington University in the United States, she obtained her bachelor's degree in political science and humanities in 2021. She has been a communications consultant to the State Chancellery. She has served as Latvia's UN Youth Delegate. After completing her internship at Latvia's Permanent Mission to the UN in New York, in 2024 she obtained a master's degree in international security from the Paris Institute of Political Studies. Upon returning to Latvia, she joined the foreign service.

**Ilze Brands-Kehris**

Ilze Brands-Kehris holds a Bachelor of Arts in international relations from Mills College, CA, U.S.A. (1982), a Master of Arts in Political Science from Columbia University, NY, U.S.A. (1983), and pursued Ph.D. studies at Columbia University. She has been a visiting professor at Columbia University in New York on conflict prevention, human rights, and minority rights. Ms Brands-Kehris is a human rights specialist with over 20 years of experience, having held various senior positions, such as Director of the Latvian Centre for Human Rights (2002–2011), Chair of the Management Board of the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency (2010–2012), and Director of the Office of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (2011–2014). In June 2016, she was elected to the UN Human Rights Committee. Since January 2020, she has been Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights. She heads the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in New York and advises the UN Secretary-General on human rights issues.

**Ilze Doškina**

Ilze Doškina was Executive Director of the UNICEF National Committee in Latvia from 1996 to 2007. She has co-authored the unofficial report on the state of children in Latvia and the UNICEF annual report on the state of children in the country. She has taken part in the Special Session of the UN General Assembly on Children and the preparations for the Special Session. She studied English and English literature, as well as social work and social education. Previously, she headed the Microsoft Partners in Learning programme in the Baltic States. Having founded the regional office of the Baltic-American Freedom Foundation, Ms Doškina is currently its Regional Programme Director and since 2010 has been its Head of the Representation.

**Mārtiņš Drēģeris**

Mārtiņš Drēģeris obtained a bachelor's degree in theology and the science of religion in 2004. In 2013 he obtained a professional master's degree in law from the Faculty of Law of the University of Latvia. He is a qualified lawyer. From 2011 to 2013, he was Deputy Head of the Press Service of the President of Latvia at the Chancery of the President of Latvia. From 2013 to 2014 he was Head of the Public Relations Programme of the Foundation "Riga 2014 – European Capital of Culture". From 2015 to 2023, Mr Drēģeris served as Adviser to the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia. Since 8 July 2023, he has been Communication Adviser to the President of Latvia. Mr Drēģeris compiled and co-authored the book "A Century of Latvian Diplomacy" (Riga: Zvaigzne ABC, 2020 (in Latvian), 2021 (in English)). He is the author of several publications on international relations, Latvia's constitutional law, the history of law, diplomacy and the philosophy of law.

**Katrīna Kaktiņa**

In 2003, Katrīna Kaktiņa obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree specialising in intercultural relations between Latvia and Spain from the Latvian Academy of Culture. In 2007, she obtained a degree in law from the Faculty of Law of the University of Latvia and a Fulbright scholarship to pursue her master's degree at Georgetown University Law Center, where she obtained a master's degree in law, graduating with honours in 2008. As a diplomat, Ms Kaktiņa is especially interested in international organisations and public international law, including state and diplomatic immunity, international treaty law and the law of the sea. She has held various posts within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs since 2003. Ms Kaktiņa has worked with issues such as the case brought before the Constitutional Court regarding the Latvia–Russia Border Treaty; the ratification of the Convention on State Immunity, where she was involved in the introduction of the doctrine of restrictive state immunity in Latvia; the ratification process of the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities; and the drafting of the Riga Protocol of the Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism. During the Latvian Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2015, Ms Kaktiņa led negotiations on behalf of the European Union, and she was also involved in the MONEYVAL evaluation of Latvia. At the time of writing this article, Ms Kaktiņa was Ambassador of Latvia to the UN, OSCE and other international organisations in Vienna; she had previously also worked at the Permanent Mission to the UN in New York. As of 15 August 2024, she is Director of the International Organisations and Human Rights Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

**Jānis Kārklīš**

Jānis Kārklīš holds a degree in engineering from Riga Technical University (1980–1985) and is a graduate of the Leadership Programme for Eastern European Diplomats at the Hoover Institute of Stanford University (1992). He began his career

at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1992 as Deputy Director of the Administrative Department. He has served as Deputy State Secretary and has worked at the Latvian missions in Finland and France. Mr Kārklīņš has been Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Latvia to France and the United Nations in Geneva (2000–2007 and 2015–2020), and he has also served as non-resident Ambassador of Latvia to Monaco, Andorra, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). Mr Kārklīņš has headed the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and served as Assistant Director-General for Communication and Information at UNESCO. From 2020 to 2024, he was posted as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Latvia to the Council of Europe. He is currently an Ambassador at Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

### **Kristīne Līce**

Kristīne Līce obtained a degree in law from the Faculty of Law of the University of Latvia in 1996. She furthered her education at Oxford University's Diplomacy Studies Programme. Since 8 July 2023 she has been Legislation and International Law Adviser to the President of Latvia. She has worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs since 1994. Ms Līce headed the Legal Department and has worked at the Permanent Missions of Latvia to the UN in Geneva and New York. In 2007, she served as Vice-Chair of the 3rd Committee (Human Rights) of the UN General Assembly. Ms Līce has served as Representative of Latvia to international human rights institutions since 2012. Since 2022, she has also been Head of the Legal Directorate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 2021, she was elected as Chair of the Steering Committee on Human Rights at the Council of Europe. She is the author of several articles published in the legal journal "Jurista Vārds". Ms Līce has given lectures on human rights issues at the Latvian Judicial Training Centre, the Centre for Further Legal Education and Professional Improvement of the Faculty of Law of the University of Latvia, and the Riga Graduate School of Law. She has submitted opinions to the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court of Latvia in the capacity of an invited expert.

### **Jānis Mažeiks**

Jānis Mažeiks holds a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Latvia (1996) and a European Master's in Human Rights and Democratisation from the University of Padova in Italy (1998). He joined the foreign service in 1995, specialising in international organisations and human rights. Mr. Mažeiks has worked at the Permanent Representation of Latvia to the Council of Europe. From 2006 to 2007, he was Foreign Policy Adviser to President of Latvia Vaira Viķe-Freiberga, and he participated in the organisation of the NATO Riga Summit. He has served as Ambassador of Latvia to the UN in Geneva (2007–2011) and in

New York (2013–2018). From 2018 to 2021, he was Political Director at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Since September 2021, he has been Head of the EU Delegation to the Republic of Moldova.

### **Lieutenant Colonel Dainis Ozoliņš (Latvian Army)**

LtCol Dainis Ozoliņš is an officer in the National Armed Forces of Latvia. He has served in the Armed Forces since 1992. LtCol Ozoliņš has graduated from the National Defence Academy of Latvia and the Baltic Defence College in Tartu, Estonia; he holds a Bachelor's degree in law. During his service, he has held a number of positions in various NATO and national military headquarters, including Chief of the National Armed Forces Headquarters Department and Assistant Chief of Staff at the NATO Multinational Division North. He has been posted to the NATO ACT Staff Element Europe in Belgium and the United Nations Headquarters in New York. LtCol Ozoliņš has been deployed to several international operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and the Middle East.

### **Mārtiņš Paparinskis**

Mārtiņš Paparinskis holds a degree in law from the Faculty of Law of the University of Latvia, and master's and doctoral degrees in law from Oxford University. He is a professor of public international law at University College London. Dr Paparinskis is a member of the UN International Law Commission, nominated by the Baltic States – in 2023, he served as the Chair of the Drafting Committee of the Commission, while in 2024, he was the First Vice-Chair of the Commission. He has represented Latvia at the International Court of Justice and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea.

### **Aivars Puriņš**

Aivars Puriņš has studied at the University of Latvia and Cranfield University; he holds a master's degree in economics and global security. He has been working with defence and security issues since 2000. Mr Puriņš has worked at the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Chancery of the President of Latvia. He has studied at the Baltic Defence College, where he has also given lectures. Mr Puriņš has been posted to Latvia's Permanent Delegation to NATO in Brussels. In April 2024, he was appointed as State Secretary at the Ministry of Defence.

### **Ilvija Pūce**

Ilvija Pūce is a lawyer (LL.M.), she has studied at the University of Latvia and Riga Graduate School of Law and has regularly furthered her education at courses in various countries. She has over 20 years of experience in human rights, mostly in the non-governmental sector (Latvian Centre for Human Rights, DIGNITY – Danish

Institute Against Torture). Currently, Ms Pūce is a legal adviser at the Supreme Court of Latvia. She was a member of the Council of Europe Committee for the Prevention of Torture for 12 years and a member of the UN Committee against Torture for four years. She has taken part in on-site monitoring visits, performed studies, provided opinions and drafted reports for organisations in Latvia and internationally. Ms Pūce has worked on fact-finding missions and has led training courses around the world: in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, East and West Africa, and Central Asia.

### **Gunda Reire**

Gunda Reire holds a doctoral degree in political science. She is currently Head of the Chancery of the President of Latvia and Director of the Center for International Studies. She also holds the position of an assistant professor at Riga Stradiņš University and a guest lecturer at Riga Graduate School of Law. Dr Reire has served as Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Adviser to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, as well as Deputy Chair of the Strategic Analysis Commission, which combined the academic and practical aspects of politics. The Commission acted under the auspices of President Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga (1999–2007). She has also served as Head of the Office of the Speaker of the Parliament and has been an adviser to several ministers. She holds a doctoral degree in political science and international politics from the University of Latvia. Dr Reire has also studied at Humboldt University of Berlin and Albert Ludwig University of Freiburg. She has been a Fulbright Scholar at the Johns Hopkins University SAIS Centre for Transatlantic Relations. Dr Reire's research interests include international peace and security, multilateral politics, the study of Russia and strategic communication.

### **Edgars Rinkēvičs**

Edgars Rinkēvičs has been President of Latvia since 8 July 2023. From 25 October 2011 to 7 July 2023, he was Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia. From October 2008 to October 2011, he served as Head of the Chancery of the President of Latvia for President Valdis Zatlers. From August 1997 to October 2008, Mr Rinkēvičs was State Secretary at the Ministry of Defence. In 2006, he served as Head of the NATO Riga Summit Latvia Task Force. He obtained a bachelor's degree in history from the Faculty of History and Philosophy of the University of Latvia in 1995, as well as a master's degree in political science from the University of Latvia in 1998. From 1999 to 2000, Mr Rinkēvičs obtained a Master's degree in the Industry Studies Program for National Security and Resource Strategy from the US National Defence University. From 1994 to 1995, he studied political science and international relations at the University of Groningen (the Netherlands).

**Rita Ruduša**

Rita Ruduša is a journalist, former public media executive and screenwriter. Ms Ruduša is the founder and first Executive Director of the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence, a professional training organisation for journalists. She has held the positions of commissioning editor and programme director at Latvian Television. She has also chaired the Latvian Association of Journalists and been actively involved in public diplomacy by representing Latvia at the UNESCO International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC), taking part in international media forums and leading media literacy and fundraising training courses for media professionals in EU Eastern Partnership countries and North Africa. Ms Ruduša is a regular contributor to publications “Satori”, “Kino Raksti” and “Punctum”, and she has authored two books: “Forced Underground. Homosexuals in Soviet Latvia” (Riga: Mansards, 2012 (Latvian), 2014 (English)) and “Latvijas mediju arheoloģija” (“The Archaeology of Media in Latvia”) (Riga: Satori, 2021). She is a documentary screenwriter. Her first feature-length film “Homo Sovieticus” (Mistrus Media (Latvia), Frame Films (Czech Republic), Monoklis (Lithuania)) premièred in 2021, and “The Blessed Ones” (MaGlka (Ukraine), VFS Films (Latvia)) is currently in production.

**Aiga Rūrāne**

Aiga Rūrāne obtained a medical degree in 1986 from the Riga Institute of Medicine (now Riga Stradiņš University) and continued her post-graduate studies in Saint-Petersburg, where she did her clinical internship at the Third Medical Institute, graduating in 1989 with a specialisation in gynaecology and obstetrics. She has practised medicine in Latvia and has worked at the Division for Protection of the Health of Mothers and Children at the Ministry of Health of Latvia, and she headed the Division from 1992 to 1995. From 1995 to 2018, Dr Rūrāne worked at the World Health Organisation, heading its Country Office in Latvia. She has also worked at the WHO Regional Office in Copenhagen and served as the WHO Representative to Slovenia (2019–2024). Dr Rūrāne has furthered her education in medicine and public health through post-graduate studies in Canada, Sweden and elsewhere. She studied public health in the master’s and doctoral programmes of Riga Stradiņš University (2005–2008). She has co-authored several WHO publications (“Health Systems in Transition”, and “Latvia: Health system review”, 2003, 2008, 2012).

**Vaira Viķe-Freiberga**

Dr Vaira Viķe-Freiberga served as President of Latvia for two terms – from 1999 to 2007. She was actively involved in the process of strengthening the democratisation of the state and its rule of law. She advocated for Latvia’s foreign policy interests moving forward the process of Latvia’s accession to the European Union and NATO. In 2005, she served as Special Envoy to the UN Secretary-General on UN reform, and in 2006 she was the candidate of the Baltic states for the post of UN Secretary-General. Since

the end of her term in office as President of Latvia, Dr Viķe-Freiberga has been actively involved in the work of various international organisations and working groups. She is a founding member of Club de Madrid and since 2014, has served as its President for two terms. Since 2007, she has been a member of the European Council on Foreign Relations and has co-chaired the European Foreign Policy Scorecard Steering Group. In 2007, she was elected as Vice-Chair of the Reflection Group on the Long-Term Future of Europe, and she has chaired the European Research Council Review Panel and the High-level Group on Freedom and Pluralism of Media in the EU. She has been a member of the OSCE Panel of Eminent Persons on European Security and the working group on European Security. For two years, she was part of the Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security established by the Kofi Annan Foundation, and she has also worked on the Lancet COVID-19 Commission and the COP 29 International Advisory Committee (2024). Since 2023, she has been a member of the High-Level Advisory Council for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations High Representative. She is a founding member and founding co-chair of the board of the Nizami Ganjavi International Center – a center for learning, tolerance, dialogue, understanding and shared societies. She is also a member of various other organisations, advisory groups and working groups. Dr Viķe-Freiberga is a highly experienced scholar, organisational leader, and speaker. She is actively involved at the international level on issues pertaining to democracy, social justice, European history and culture. Dr Viķe-Freiberga has received numerous awards, including the 2005 Hannah Arendt Prize for Political Thought and received the highest honours from different states. She has authored almost 20 books and been a co-author of many others. She holds a doctoral degree in psychology. Dr Viķe-Freiberga was a professor at McGill University in Montreal, later focusing her work on scientific and academic research.

### **Agnese Vilde**

Agnese Vilde holds a master's degree in political science from the University of Latvia. She has been working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia since 2003, and the majority of her career has been related to multilateral diplomacy and human rights. In August 2024, she was appointed as Ambassador of Latvia to the Council of Europe; before that, she was Director of the International Organisations and Human Rights Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Ms Vilde has worked at Latvia's Permanent Missions to the UN in Vienna and New York. During Latvia's Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2015, she led the UN inter-governmental negotiations on the Political Declaration on the Occasion of the Twentieth Anniversary of the Fourth World Conference of Women on behalf of the European Union. Ms Vilde has worked on the National Advisory Committee on Gender Equality in Latvia, and from 2021 to 2024 she served as Latvia's representative to the Women, Peace and Security Focal Points Network.

“Zinātne” Publishers  
Akadēmijas laukums 1, Rīga, LV-1050  
Registration No. 40003576967

Printed by Jelgavas tipogrāfija



