

Jāzeps Rancāns as the Acting President of Latvia (1947–1969)

Published: 19.03.2021.



Source: Latgale Culture and History Museum

Acting President as Speaker of the Saeima, 1947–1969

Soviet occupation of Latvia was never recognised as legal either by Latvian people or international community. As an entity of international law, Latvian State continued to exist *de iure* throughout the occupation period, while international community maintained a consistent policy of non-recognition of illegal annexation carried out by USSR. Latvia's diplomatic missions and consulates abroad remained fully active, representing Latvian State and its people on the international arena. Meanwhile, national resistance movement gathered force in occupied Latvia. Their demands were clear: restore Latvia's independence based on state continuity and constitution. A pivotal role in the national resistance movement was played by the Latvian Central Council, founded on 13 August 1943, mostly made up of politicians from majority parties that won the last general election. Latvian Central Council drew its legitimacy from Speaker of the Saeima, Pauls Kalniņš, and his deputies – Kārlis Pauļuks and Jāzeps Rancāns. According to the Latvian Central Council, and Section 12–13 of Satversme (Constitution), mandate of the 4th convocation of Saeima, elected on 3–4 October 1931, remained in force until a new convocation was elected and assembled for its first plenary after free elections held pursuant to Satversme. As Section 16 of Satversme stipulates, Presidium of Saeima has to continue to represent the parliament until its mandate expires. That includes periods of occupation. Since Latvia had lost its president at the time, according to Section 52 of Satversme and Section 23 of the Saeima Rules of Procedure, Speaker of the Saeima (or his deputies when speaker was absent) had to substitute the president. Speaker Pauls Kalniņš, and his deputy Jāzeps Rancāns, according to Satversme, became the successive acting presidents and continued to demand restoration of Latvia's independence and democratic government explicitly stipulated in the constitution. Continuity of presidency as an institution, with Pauls Kalniņš and Jāzeps Rancāns as acting presidents, contributed to the doctrine of continuity of Latvian State. They remained politically active despite troubling times for the Latvian State, thus showing that, although occupied, national resistance movement continued to act according to Satversme and represented Latvia as best as it could under the circumstances and provisions of the constitution regarding the presidency.

On the position of acting president

Bishop Jāzeps Rancāns was the second Deputy Speaker of the Saeima during the 2^d, 3rd and 4th convocation (1925–1931, 1932–

1934). After occupation, as the second Deputy Speaker of the 4th Saeima, he joined national resistance and became one of the key figures in the fight for restoration of Latvia's independence and democratic government based on state continuity and Satversme. Jāzeps Rancāns was a member of the extended presidium of the Latvian Central Council.

When Pauls Kalniņš died, Jāzeps Rancāns became the Chair of Latvian Central Council in Germany on 27 August 1945. Initially there were doubts about who should be the next president because there was no confirmation of what had happened to the first Deputy Speaker Kārlis Pauļuks who stayed in occupied Latvia. Only in early 1947, when it became clear that Kārlis Pauļuks had already been dead since 21 January 1945, was this finally decided.

On 26 April 1947, during a meeting in Esslingen, political groups forming the Latvian Central Council decided to follow the procedures established by Satversme and Saeima's Rules of Procedure and appoint the second Deputy Speaker Jāzeps Rancāns the acting president of Latvia and speaker of the Saeima after the death of Pauls Kalniņš and Kārlis Pauļuks. Members of the Latvian Central Council residing in Sweden supported such move and on 4 June 1947 a joint announcement of Latvian Central Council was released. Jāzeps Rancāns' mandate was reconfirmed by the Conference of Latvian parliamentarians on 19-20 August 1947 and officially approved by senators of the Senate of Latvia with a special confirmation of 13 March/3 April 1947.

As the head of Latvian Central Council in exile, Jāzeps Rancāns continued to demand restoration of Latvia's independence and democratic government. He also represented Latvian refugees and the state of Latvia, actively communicating with international partners and writing numerous official letters to Western leaders explaining the implication of Latvia's current status. Jāzeps Rancāns cared for Latvian refugees dearly. He was deeply concerned with their needs and making sure they continued to believe in independent and democratic Latvia.

Latvian Central Council attempted to create a government in exile led by Jāzeps Rancāns based on Satversme, working towards recognition of such government and its political objectives by Latvian diaspora and diplomatic service in exile. However, these attempts failed due to lack of support among Latvian community in exile, which believed that Latvian Central Council did not have the exclusive mandate to form government and Latvians should be represented in other ways too. Latvia's foreign service was also against government in exile because of clear diplomatic signals suggesting that the allegiance to a new internationally unrecognised government in exile would jeopardise the policy of non-recognition of Latvia's occupation, as well as diplomatic service's capacity to continue working and representing Latvia internationally. During a meeting in Geneva on 14-23 May 1946, heads of diplomatic missions and Latvian Central Council decided to work closely together on promoting Latvia's interests, putting the question on government in exile to the side. Another meeting in London on 18-20 October 1950 ended with Kārlis Zariņš, Latvia's Ambassador and head of the diplomatic mission in London, and the extraordinary and plenipotentiary representative of the Latvian government, refusing to recognise the Latvian Central Council as the official Latvian government in exile. He, nevertheless, urged Council to continue to work together towards independence of Latvia in future. Issue of government in exile drove deep divisions in exile community. Heated debates often erupted between different political and public groups within diaspora. Later, on 2 January 1956, in Stockholm, Latvian Central Council in Europe re-confirmed Jāzeps Rancāns as the acting president of Latvia and urged Latvians back at home and around the world to accept him as their political leader, but other countries still hesitated to internationally recognise the authority of Jāzeps Rancāns as the head of Latvian State and speaker of the parliament.

After emigrating to the United States in 1951, Jāzeps Rancāns became less politically active. Still, he continued to play an active part in the diaspora dialogue until his last breath. His leadership gave many a hope of independent Latvia resurging and democracy prevailing. He also used his influence to support the interests of Latvian state and people internationally.

Biography

Jāzeps Rancāns (or Jezups Rancāns) was born on 25 October 1886 in Livzinieki (Liuzenieki) of Zaļmuiža parish near Ludza. Went to Zaļmuiža Parish School and Ludza District School. Enrolled in Kronstadt Gymnasium after passing remote exams. Studied at St Petersburg Catholic Seminary and St Petersburg Roman Catholic Theological Academy. Graduated with doctoral diploma in theology and was ordained in 1911.

Worked as a school chaplain and a vicar in St Petersburg until the World War I, did some teaching at the St Petersburg Catholic Seminary. In addition to teaching theology subjects, also taught Latvian to future priests attending Catholic Seminary. Took active interest in social life of Latvians in St Petersburg, was a member of the board of St Petersburg Latvian friendship community. During the World War I served as chaplain of the 10th regiment of Russian army (1914–1916) and board member of the central committee helping Latvian refugees. Became a professor of Petrograd Catholic Seminary in 1916.

Was one of the main drivers and supporters of the concept for uniting Latvia. One of the organisers of the first Latgale Latvian Congress in Rēzekne on 26–27 April (9–10 May) 1917 and chief rapporteur on amalgamation of Latgale with Vidzeme and Kurzeme. Took vote on decisions of Latgale Congress and became a member of the transitional government of Latgale.

Was an active member of Latvian Transitional National Council. Was appointed a member of its foreign section. Came back to Latvia from St Petersburg in 1918 to open a Catholic Seminary in Aglona. Became a member of the People's Council of Latvia from Latgalian group in November 1918. Became Latvia's special envoy to the Holy See in 1919, facilitated Latvia's international recognition and helped draft concordat between Latvia and the Holy See.

Became the assistant bishop of the Riga Archdiocese in 1923 and in 1924 was ordained as its vicar general. Worked as the professor and rector of Catholic Seminary of Riga Archdiocese (later renamed to Theology Academy) from 1920 to 1938. Later, from 1938, served as the dean and professor of the Roman Catholic Theology Faculty of the University of Latvia.

One of the leaders of Latgale Christian Greens Union (later known as Christian Farmers Party and Christian Peasants and Catholics Party). Member of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Saeima. Served as the second deputy speaker during the 2nd, 3rd and 4th convocation (1925–1931, 1932–1934). Was a member of the Riga City Council (1930–1934) and was deeply involved in various social organisations, published numerous articles in various media outlets.

During occupation became one of the members of the national resistance movement. Together with others founded the Latvian Central Council and became a member of its extended presidium. His flat was used for meetings of the Latvian Central Council on routine basis. The meeting of 8 September 1944, when Pauls Kalniņš signed the Declaration on restoration of Latvian State, was also arranged in his flat. He was the third person to put his signature on the 17 March 1944 Memorandum of the Latvian Central Council.

In 1944 together with other bishops was forced to flee to Germany and ended up in Berghausen Capuchin monastery in Bavaria as the World War II came to close. Restored Latgale Christian Peasants and Catholics Party and actively contributed to social and political agenda of the exile community. After Pauls Kalniņš death, took over the reins of Latvian Central Council and, as the second deputy speaker of the Saeima, became the speaker and the acting president of Latvia.

Moved to Grand Rapids (USA) in 1951 where he served as a chaplain at the Carmelite Sisters senior living and care facilities. Took part in the Second Vatican Council, actively contributed to social life of exile community and defended the idea of bringing back the independent and democratic Latvia. Died in Grand Rapids on 2 December 1969.

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