

# Address of the President of Latvia, Egils Levits, at the first sitting of the Saeima 2020 autumn session

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[Egils Levits](#)



Honourable Madam Speaker,

Esteemed Members of the Parliament,

I

The keyword of my speech is sustainability. Sustainability is the power to sustain. Knowing your values and passing them down to the next generation. It is about crafting a future where these values can exist. We should not think, 'Let the future come and we will see what we need to do'. Our today's decisions and foresight should help us build a better future for the people of Latvia.

A decade, or 2030, is a good mark for sustainable goals. It is close enough to give no room for fantasies, and far enough to not get bogged down in practical detail. Dear members of the Saeima, today I want to talk to you about several specific steps that I consider important.

II

Regional reform approved by the Saeima during the spring session puts sustainable and balanced development of Latvia first. Bigger regions would have more economic power and improved capacity to provide the required services.

However, let me also stress that the adoption of the Law on Administrative Territories and Populated Areas is only the first element in the regional reform package. Many fundamental questions pertaining to the new local government system still need to be resolved through other laws and the overall success of the regional reform hinges on these other, related laws.

So, there are two important aspects of the reform that I would like to focus on further in my speech. One of them is sense of

belonging, the other one democratic participation.

I do believe that general public would be a lot less concerned about the regional reform if both of them would have been properly addressed in the initial reform plan.

III

Dear members of the Saeima,

You will soon receive my historical Latvian lands bill. This bill is based on Article 3.2 of the Law on Administrative Territories and Populated Areas.

Bill aims to create a forward-looking national policy on preservation of Latvianness in all its diversity and sustainable development of Latvia's cultural and historical environment. By strengthening the sense of belonging to local communities, local cultural spaces and historical Latvian lands we will enhance our common national identity.

Let us not forget that we belong to the generation that should take the leadership in this issue. If we manage to make sure that future generations benefit from cultural and historical environment as much as we do, we can consider the law a success.

IV

I was happy to see that our parliament, Saeima, already provided the right to democratically elect their representatives to local communities (smaller settlements and towns) in the new regional reform law. These representatives would manage local level affairs. We should make sure smaller settlements and towns do not feel left behind or forgotten by the state.

We must always remember that various ways of participating will never be better than directly elected representatives.

Participatory frameworks are good, but they lack one essential element. Democratic legitimacy that only elections can give. Saeima has tasked the Cabinet of Ministers with ensuring these rights of local communities are regulated by law. We all expect the Cabinet to do it.

V

Dear members of the parliament,

Regional reform aims to enhance our shared well-being, roots and involvement. However, that is not enough for sustainability of our nation. We need a purposeful, and let me underline this, a dedicated demographic and family policy geared towards measurable outcomes.

According to EUROSTAT, population is likely to shrink by 200 000 in this decade, by 2030, and by more than half a million in the next 30 years, or by 2050.

There will only be 1.4 million people living in Latvia. As for Estonia, Eurostat has estimated that in 2030 and 2050 its population will be roughly the same as now, around 1.3 million.

We have ministries, departments and agencies that all work for the sake of families and children, but we somehow do not have an integrated demographic policy that is being prioritised and properly funded.

Demographic policy should focus on support for families. But it should, of course, cover much broader range of issues, for example, taxes. There should be real tax benefits for families, support in scope of housing policy, which was almost forgotten until now. There should also be smart re-emigration policy and other policies that are vital for population growth.

Demography and families are undoubtedly cross-cutting issues. But there is no efficient cross-cutting policy or the so-called horizontal policy. And more importantly, there is no responsible authority that would take charge of this policy as its main priority,

not priority number five or number ten. Estonia launched its demography and family policy more than ten years ago and is now reaping its benefits. One of the seats in the Estonian government is responsible for population. Minister for Population has political ownership over this crucial issue for sustainable development of Estonia. We should also create an appropriate institutional framework for that.

VI

Dear members of the parliament, during the closing of the spring session I already said that complex 21st century world cannot be run with 19th century government where ministries are responsible for traditional policy areas and numerous priorities significant for a modern state are left without political leadership. Apart from demography policy, another typical example of lack of policy coordination is the quality of information space and security policy. These are sectors that are covered by several ministries. However, none of them is fully responsible for, for example, social media. And there is no national social media policy. But the quality or distortion of information that we consume on daily bases directly influences how rational or ill-informed or decisions are.

VII

Dear members of the parliament, I am happy to see that you have begun to address the issues linked to public service broadcasting. The second reading of Public Service Broadcasting Law is on your agenda and the law will most likely be adopted by the end of this year.

These media are the core element of information space. Their democratic accountability, journalistic and ethical standards should be the golden standard for the rest of the media.

Public service broadcasting is publicly funded because, contrary to commercial media, we expect public service broadcasters to fulfil a particular function. Their function is to strengthen democratic system of Latvia, sense of belonging to Latvia, national identity, language, and also promote awareness about Latvia as a national state governed by the rule of law.

We must also take into account that the structure of the public information space has significantly changed in the age of social media. It has become much more fragmented. There are numerous parallel bubbles, and their tenants tend to think subjectively that their bubble represents the opinion of the people, that their bubble is representative of people's opinions. That is why public media play an even more important role of covering and integrating these fragmented bubbles as much as possible.

This bill will ensure the independence of public media, but it will not liberate them from this duty.

That is why I would like you to consider the following two aspects when debating the proposed bill.

First, choose the public media governance model that allows formulating and representing public interests, and enjoys the trust and support of both the public and the journalists that work for these public media.

And, secondly, make sure that the board entrusted with representing the public interest has the tools to efficiently guarantee that public media can do their job according to relevant quality and accountability standards.

As far as information space is considered, I would like to reiterate that it is the government that is responsible for promoting quality of commercial media, including bigger regional media. However, I would also like to underline that this concerns honest commercial media, not some corrupt wheeler-dealers and their outlets or media spreading Kremlin's propaganda.

VIII

Colleagues,

E-governance is another important strand of work. It also requires horizontal policy, governance model and legal framework. Current fragmentation keeps Latvia away from developing into a modern country.

Single national digital platform should be the place where both the government and private sector provide their services based on clear and safe standards.

Services should be compatible, convenient and easy to use, ensuring full protection of data and privacy.

At the same time, we should avoid creating the digital monster that makes people slave to technology.

I would specifically like to emphasize algorithms. Both in public and private sector. Algorithm is not a legal norm. These algorithms should not determine what we should or should not do. Algorithms should not restrict our human rights and life opportunities given to us by law. Right to choose our actions without anyone's interference or command. This isn't just purely a technical issue. It is one of the core, political, legal policy and constitutional issues. One of the issues that we will have to make our mind on in the following years to make sure digital advancement does not hold us as humans back.

Digital transformation should be used as a tool for enhancing the quality of life. But it can also become a weapon and backfire on us. E-governance and other digital initiatives should properly address these risks that are associated with digital transformation.

For example, everyone should also have direct access to government services, especially in the case of tailored solutions or outliers.

For that we need legal innovation. For example, if somebody has unlawfully accessed personal data, victim should be automatically notified and financially compensated for such a breach of law.

One of the advantages of Latvia as it enters the digital transformation and competes with other countries is not only technical know-how but also legal innovation. The kind of innovation that is not only efficient from a utilitarian point of view but also ensures that people's rights are upheld and personal freedom will be respected.

IX

Dear members of the parliament,

Higher education reform, which is crucial for sustainable development of Latvia as a modern country, is also on the agenda of the Saeima.

The overarching objective of this reform is to create a university ecosystem that will drive the growth of our country and will serve as the catalyst for its development, enabling students to access quality and competitive higher education in Europe and globally. This ecosystem should generate knowledge that society needs, and thus directly foster growth of Latvian economy, as well as promoting intellectual and cultural development.

On the other hand, universities should be the place where people can not only access technical knowledge and skills to be able to contribute to our economy as workforce, but also an environment where you grow, develop as an individual and learn the joy of thinking.

Universities should also be drivers for strengthening national democracy and patriotism. They should always take interest in preservation and development of national culture in every sense of the word. Latvian should also be the language of science in the 21st century.

National significance of universities should not diminish as a result of reform.

X

Dear members of the Saeima,

Better legislation is what all of us need. That is why I strongly urge you to continue the debate on the establishment of National Council.

Council would be responsible for evaluation of bills to ensure that they are aligned with national sustainable development goals, provisions and fundamental values of the Constitution before their adoption.

Legislature has always been and must be political. Most laws are the result of political compromise, which is normal for democracy. But political compromise translated into law might not always conform with constitutional values and national sustainability objectives or, in other words, common good.

The task of National Council would be to give its expert opinion based on facts and well considered opinions. Parliament, of course, would have the final say, but National Council would give more impetus to national sustainability and constitutional values or, in other words, our common good in the whole discussion.

It would significantly improve the legislation and promote development and sustainability of our country.

XI

Dear members of the parliament,

I would like to conclude by addressing several important foreign and security policy priorities.

One of the core elements of our national sustainability is active and professional foreign policy. Visibility and participation in European and global policy strengthens our security. We need to be ambitious in terms of contributing to the agenda of international democratic institutions. Therefore, I would like to thank all our foreign policy makers for what they have already done.

Colleagues,

Supporting non-violent resistance of Belarusian civic society is our moral duty. fair elections the main element of democracy has been fouled.

That is what our democratic conviction and historic experience dictates us. By clearly expressing joint position early on, Baltic countries and Poland led the adoption of joint European Union position on developments in Belarus.

One of the foreign policy success storeys is the Cross-Regional Statement on countering widespread disinformation, or the Infodemic, in the Context of COVID-19, initiated by Latvia and signed by 130 UN member states. In a recent phone call, the UN Secretary-General Guterres thanked Latvia for this initiative and underlined that Latvia's efforts in countering disinformation have demonstrated that Latvia is capable of global leadership and our internationally acknowledged competence should be put to greater use within the organisation and beyond.

Dem members of the parliament,

This is only one of the good examples that demonstrates that our country and our society is mature enough to give a significant contribution to solving problems on a bigger scale. In 2025, Latvia will be one of the candidates for the seat in the UN Security Council, which is the most prestigious and most influential UN institution.

To become a member of the council we need to convince 129 other countries to support us. That is why we need to clearly define what our goals will be to be able to convince the 129 other countries to vote for us. This is a priority that not only foreign policymakers are responsible for but also wider society and non-governmental sector should be involved in.

XII

Foreign and security policy will continue to be one of our priorities. We cannot lose focus in these complex circumstances. When it comes to defence, we need to continue what we have already started, especially with military procurements aimed at

strengthening our capabilities. We cannot scale down these procurements implementing linear cuts based on GDP projections that are going to be a lot more pessimistic because of Covid-19 pandemic.

Latvia must make sure that we provide a meaningful input in NATO's future strategy discussion already now. Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg launched consultations with the members of the alliance on the NATO2030 strategy in June. We must make sure that changes that will affect NATO in the coming decade contribute to strengthening of our security. We must formulate our vision, coordinate it with regional partners and make sure that these positions are properly reflected in NATO joint plans.

XIII

European Union has found the right answer to Covid-19 pandemic in the form of European Recovery Fund. However, poorly coordinated and delayed response at the outset of the crisis shows that European Union lacks the necessary institutional competence to deal with such unprecedented circumstances. Latvia should bring back the union crisis stress test issue and contribute to development of appropriate institutional frameworks within the EU.

When it comes to consequences of pandemic, as well as economic resilience, we are amongst the leading countries in the Union. Economic downturn will not be as severe as in most other European countries, and next year according to central bank's forecast we could even see GDP growing.

Therefore, additional funding that we could get from the European Recovery Fund gives us a unique opportunity to invest it wisely in order to also restructure our economy, make it greener and higher added value oriented. In particular, we need to invest in science and innovation.

European Green Deal and greening of the economy to make it more climate friendly is a challenge that the government and the whole society should be working much more actively on. Let us not forget that we need to create a future economic model for ourselves. The faster we do it, the better.

XIV

Dear members of the parliament,

Our today's decisions will shape our future. Let us be smart and think sustainably.

You have an intense spell of work ahead of you. So, let me wish good luck to all of you and all of us!



<https://www.president.lv/en/article/address-president-latvia-egils-levits-first-sitting-saeima-2020-autumn-session>