

Address of the President of Latvia, Egils Levits, at the General Assembly of Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments

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[Egils Levits](#)

[Domestic policy](#)



Honourable heads of local and regional governments, participants, ladies and gentlemen,

I

The four-year municipal election cycle has come to an end. Thank you for everything you have done for the sake of your constituencies!

These elections will give us new local governments, which will take charge of their new administrative areas created by the regional reform.

Reform has been on almost everyone's tongue for the past two years since it began. And it seems to me that this reform was even more talked-about and debated than the Coronavirus pandemic.

Regional reform was approved by the legislators, while the initial ruling of the Constitutional Court recognises that reform is generally in line with the constitution – Satversme. Some adjustments will be made, but altogether this reform meets constitutional standards and has been given the green light. This means that it is time to look ahead and decide what new local governments should do together in the next four years to meet the expectations of their voters under the mandate given to them.

I would like to remind all local government, parliament and cabinet members of what this reform intended to achieve. The goal was not and could not have been a mere linear reduction of the number of municipalities or elected members of local administrations.

The aim of this reform was to ensure that every resident of Latvia can enjoy equal standard of living and equal access to public

services wherever they live. This reform is meant to become a solid foundation for homogenous and successful development of Latvia. Growth that meets the expectations of all people living in our country.

II

And the law alone will not bring us closer to the goal. We also need every municipality to work hard and responsibly together with local community and public bodies, as well as neighbouring municipalities, to achieve meaningful change.

I believe it is absolutely crucial for government institutions to be open to cooperation with municipalities and ready to take their ideas on board instead of fighting back or ignoring such proposals.

Let us not forget that local governments are closer to their people and they know best what their community wants and expects. They also know what government policies are needed to achieve that – which interventions would give local communities immediate effect in different areas of life.

That is why we all need to work together to make this reform a success.

Riga metropolitan area, national significance cities and regional development centres went through a phase of rapid development in recent years, and this trend is not likely to stop anytime soon. And we all need to work towards creating similar conditions elsewhere in Latvia to support better quality of life and access to various opportunities everywhere, instead of growing sense of periphery or regional disparities.

That will require major effort, but we can do it if we join our forces, if government, local administrations and civic society come together – everyone who lives in those municipalities and actively contributes to their growth on daily basis.

III

I would also like to use this opportunity to draw your attention to the importance of getting local communities and inhabitants more actively involved in democratic processes at the local level.

Participatory mechanisms must not only work at the regulatory level, but they must also be meaningful and effective at the legal and socioeconomic level. And, I know, we have had our share of ups and downs in that respect.

We also know that there are some municipalities that have developed a strong dependency on centralised power structures and insulated power centres, which tend to tolerate civic activities and democratic participation in best case scenario, while actively fighting against it or making it a mere smoke and mirrors in worst of cases.

Local referendum law is yet to be adopted and come to force, although it was promised more than 10 years ago when previous regional reform was rolled out.

Despite strong opposition, extended efforts have resulted in bringing about a law that allows local communities to elect their local councils, which would then liaise with local government on behalf of their parish or town and engage in decision-making regarding local priorities.

There has historically been little political support for greater people's involvement and stronger democratic processes at local level. Municipalities, responsible government institutions and political parties have not had the desire to address this local-level problem. And even now there are some politicians who lack the required will to make this step.

But let me be clear: democratic participation of people at the local level is absolutely indispensable in making municipalities successful and achieving the reform targets.

IV

In July new local governments will start to work and I want to urge everyone who will get elected to start thinking about how to do things differently already now. Get you community on board and start promoting democratic participation from day one after your election.

I would also like to appeal to people: use the opportunity given to you. Instead of taking concern about your local government once every four years when the elections come, get involved every day – follow the decision of your local council and regional government. Make your comments. The law gives you that right.

I expect parliament to finalise all the bills that they have promised to prepare in the context of this reform by the end of their mandate, which is bit more than a year away. Saeima is currently falling significantly behind the schedule. But the new local government law has already reached the second reading and MPs just need to continue working on the new local referendum law. I hope it will be passed before we elect a new parliament.

It is painful to see how acts concerning civic participation and stronger democratic involvement are constantly either delayed or muddled to a point where they become a nuisance and are no longer any good. That is not what we expect!

Parliament should be extra cautious in making sure that it leaves a good legacy for its successors.

V

We cannot have strong Latvia with weak municipalities, while strong municipalities rely on their people and local community that is loyal to the place and their fellow citizens. Communities which feel responsible and share concern for all kinds of local issues.

That is why I invite everyone to strengthen the democracy at the local level, and thus make Latvia stronger.

Once again, thank you for everything you have done in the past four years (for some of you it has been even longer). Good luck in forthcoming elections and beyond. Thank you!

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