

Address of the President of Latvia, Egils Levits, at the opening plenary sitting of the Saeima autumn session, 2 September 2021

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Egils Levits



Honourable Madam Speaker,

Dear members of the Saeima,

I am very happy to welcome you in person. Face-to-face debate is how this constitutional body should work. There was a disruption caused by Covid-19 pandemic, and now we are gradually returning to life as normal, and this is the *normal* for the parliament – this is how it should be.

I

In a year or so we will start looking back at what this Saeima has achieved.

Your most urgent and primary task was to regulate the best ways to protect human lives, public health and safety.

It is an issue you will continue to deal with throughout this year. A new wave of global pandemic is coming Latvia's way. Saeima and the government need to find a common approach for containing the Covid-19 pandemic and successful vaccination policy. That is what our nation needs.

Although we often hear loud 'yeas' and 'nays', we are all working towards the same goal as a nation – we fight Covid.

I am grateful to everyone here in Latvia who respects their and their relatives' health, health of other people enough to get vaccinated.

I am grateful to everyone who has reached out to others to convince them that it is safe and there is nothing to worry about.

We, of course, know why people worry. And we should not reject them for that. We must go through this crisis together and take care of each other together.

Containment of Covid-19 and maximum coverage of voluntary vaccination is the goal that the whole nation should support.

Pope Francis described it most elegantly: 'Vaccination is a simple but profound way of promoting the common good and caring for each other.'

Dear MPs,

We cannot afford to take another year of good education away from our children and a year of good business away from our companies.

I have therefore devised the following national pandemic response policy principles.

First, we need a flexible national policy. Situation is very fluid. Government must make decisions based on infection rate, most recent scientific findings and experience of European and other countries.

Saeima must adopt a law mandating Cabinet of Ministers and local governments to enforce special rules for various Covid-19 containment and public health protection scenarios.

Second, there are fields where centralised rules need to be applied universally and areas where decisions should preferably be made at a decentralised level. Law should give the Cabinet of Ministers mandate to apply comprehensive vaccination rules to specific professions, for example, social and medical workers, teachers, or specific service providers, for example, cultural institutions and cafes. But all these rules need to be discussed and adopted by the cabinet separately.

Saeima should also delegate decentralised decision-making to local governments and services, for example, allowing municipalities to decide whether to keep schools and nurseries open depending on the number of new cases.

Third, those with compatible certificates should be allowed to attend various events and use different services

Differentiated strategy does not contradict the European Convention on Human Rights, as European Court of Human Rights recently ruled in a similar case. It meets legal standards and is proportionate, adequately respecting the rights and interests of vaccinated people who had chosen to reduce the infection risk for themselves and others.

Fourth, availability of vaccines, and universal access to vaccines, means we can avoid a shutdown of the economy that we experienced last winter.

That would only be done if new cases spike and healthcare system runs out of resources and comes under the risk of a collapse.

Fifth, we must work towards repeated immunisation of already vaccinated persons and offer a third (additional) dose of vaccine to those looking to boost their immunity. This means Latvia should already start working on vaccine procurements. I know that we already have the necessary doses. By the way, Lithuania is currently also considering similar steps. So, we need to keep monitoring what is happening around us.

II

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are constantly talking about the pandemic as if this was the only priority that we have. But there are still other challenges we need to tackle in Latvia. And most important are those that influence our strategic development at the national level.

Prolonged crisis is particularly stressful and may cause negativity. That is human nature. My activities and work of the parliament and government have come under a lot of criticism. That is the unfortunate downside of leading an institution during a crisis.

That should not overshadow the significant positive long-term effect, which will come from reforms already implemented by the Saeima.

Here are just some of them: overhauling of the financial system, which saved us from a rather sharp economic downturn; regional reform and the Latvian Historical Lands Law, higher education reform, Economic Crimes Court, governance and exit from the advertising market of public service broadcasters, significant judicial efficiency gains (trials are still long, but shorter) and tax reform.

I have expressed my concerns about all of them and have offered my advice on weakness that need to be eliminated, especially in the case of tax reform, which still needs further balancing with regard to part-time employment and lowest-paying jobs.

History will remember those achievements that have the most long-term impact on nation's life and make the Latvian State better.

That is why I urge you, dear MPs, to continue current reforms and lay the groundwork for several other vital reform that will determine our country's long-term future. 12 months is enough to achieve set goals.

III

I want to focus today on two areas that are in urgent need of change. One is Latvia's internal security and the other one is our country's structural backwardness which is becoming an increasing threat.

Dear members of the Saeima,

Global pandemic was a real stress test for our healthcare system. Our Border Force has also faced a similar test recently. Pandemic clearly demonstrated the weaknesses of healthcare management system that have developed over a long time, rendering it incapable of dealing with crisis, whereas Border Guard passed the test with flying colours.

European Union's external border is now under a hybrid attack. It is not a refugee crisis. According to international rules, refugees may apply for asylum from the first safe country they get to. In this case Belarus. They face no threat there - on the contrary, they get tourist visas.

In some cases, based on humanitarian considerations, some of them might get a temporary protection from Latvia.

However, protection of Latvian, EU and NATO external border is paramount. It is our top priority to keep it safe.

We are now forced to reinforce our border with Belarus very fast. Did we really had to wait for a crisis to realise how poorly protected it is?

IV

Internal security should become our multiannual priority. Its strengthening should be supported from this year's national budget.

Let us not wait for another unexpected challenge to hit our interior system.

We have been consistently developing Latvia's external security for a while now according to relevant NATO standards. We have reached a good level, good level, indeed.

Now we need to build our internal security with the same type of consistency – step by step.

Our border patrol guards our border, but is it really fair that they have to buy their own fuel to get to work from home 30 kilometres away?

Firefighters need safe and modern equipment to be able to respond to various emergencies, instead they drive trucks that have

been made during the Soviet occupation.

We must lay the foundation for national digital security system, its governance model, and find suitable financial and human resources. Various hostile forces hidden inside and outside Latvia are actively using digital tools to attack us politically and economically.

It is important for Ministry of Interior to start building a well-trained and competent cybercrime unit early on. Now is the time to start – we cannot wait any longer because of hybrid attacks and lack of appropriately trained resources.

Pre-trial investigation procedures are unacceptably slow and poor, and closing of the Police Academy has led to lack of special programmes offering dedicated training for investigating officers and operatives.

Latvia needs a modern training centre for investigators and operatives. I hope we can find the money in this year's budget. It is not an easy task, which can be completed in a matter of months, therefore we need to start working on this multiannual initiative now.

We must also gradually reduce the enormous pay gap between, for example, interior and defence staff.

Interior system has been neglected too long from a budget perspective, and I urge you, dear MPs, to recognise that it must end now.

V

Ladies and gentlemen,

Together we must analyse and solve the problem which is becoming increasingly apparent – Latvia is starting to lag behind.

I am talking about structural backwardness.

Latvian economy is lagging behind Lithuania and Estonia in terms of long-term economic development despite the GDP jump in the last quarter. Usually we ranked second behind Estonia, and we have now fallen behind both Estonia and Lithuania. There are structural reasons for that.

More and more often we find ourselves at the bottom of EU rankings. We have ranked third from the bottom in the European Innovation Scoreboard. We have fourth worst productivity index.

57 % of our residents are digitally illiterate. Compared against the rest of Europe, it can only be called a disaster.

We have the smallest share of information and technology experts in our labour pool. That is not how modern societies work.

And then there is also the huge size of shadow economy that has not diminished. There are also all kinds of administrative hurdles and other business obstacles.

However, let me, dear MPs, focus your attention on the main reason why we are lagging behind. I am talking about the apparent inability of our state to give its residents the most valuable resource of all – good life-long learning opportunities.

Our education, technology and economic policies have lacked coherence. They are not a part of a system where each component contributes to peak performance.

That is why we have structural backwardness in Latvia. Let me repeat: it is becoming more and more apparent. And you need to figure out how to get out of this vicious circle by the end of the year.

I urge you to specifically focus on the following aspects:

First, we must finally complete the long-delayed school network reform. The main goal here is to reduce the enormous knowledge gap between schools. Knowledge should not depend on where child lives or goes to school. Regional reform is one of the solutions, but we need to finalise the transformation. I hope this Saeima can do it before next elections.

Second, we must continue to reform higher education. More targeted use of funding would eliminate fragmentation and bring universities closer to excellence, making them more internationally competitive.

And, thirdly, you need to increase the baseline funding for our science sector next year. It is currently underwhelmingly low. It is three times lower than EU average in terms of share in GDP. Dear colleagues, do you not see the difference between what we want to be and who we really are? It is up to you to handle this key cause of backwardness. You will not solve it this year, but you have to start now.

Insufficient research funding holds back innovation. State-owned enterprises and private firms are hesitant to invest in innovations because of administrative hurdles.

I urge you to focus more attention on obstacles that hold Latvia back from becoming more developed.

Our nation deserves to live in a modern and prosperous country. And their welfare depends mostly on you, dear colleagues.

VI

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me conclude my speech by briefly mentioning two bills that I will present to the Saeima in the coming days.

First initiative I will hand over contains amendments to the Cabinet Structure Law.

There are several areas in which a closer departmental and cross-cutting coordination between government bodies is indispensable for keeping up with the rapid pace of modern day life. My initiative offers the right tools for boosting cross-sectoral cooperation. Government practices and structure formed in 1922 are no longer efficient in a modern and complex state.

My legal initiative gives next Saeima and next government a possibility to appoint state ministers, politically responsible officials who would coordinate either full-term or shorter length horizontal policy activities. Saeima and Cabinet of Ministers should have such horizontal policy coordinators responsible for particular areas because there is lack of policies (other European countries have specific policies for that), and coordination – somebody who would be in charge of such measures.

The other bill is about party financing. Increased party financing from national budget was the right and politically necessary step. From a public perspective, it is cheaper to have budget-funded parties than corrupt parties. However, it was obvious even before the law came to force that some provisions will need further fine-tuning. My suggestions were discarded back then.

Here is the essence of my legislative initiative. If any parliamentary group in Saeima is disbanded or loses 2/3 of its members, party loses a part of government funding which depends on the number of seats they get. Other parts of funding would remain as they were, especially the base funding, which parties need for recovery. Such reduction would reflect their inability to fulfil their duty towards voters who had given them their votes, as they are no longer capable of influencing national policies without full parliamentary group. Inability to fulfil their voters' mandate means they no longer deserve to be funded from government budget. These rules would boost public trust in party system, which needs to improve.

Dear members of the Saeima,

There is plenty of work ahead of you this year. I hope you will be able to withstand the call of the populist Sirens. People see fake promises right away, remember failed promises, and political *upselling* will not work.

There are many who are ready to give promises, but we all know from classics that if it sounds too good to be true, then it

probably isn't.

I wish everyone all the best, a successful session, which will hopefully do lots of good for our nation and state.

<https://www.president.lv/en/article/address-president-latvia-egils-levits-opening-plenary-sitting-saeima-autumn-session-2-september-2021>