

Address by the President of Latvia, Egils Levits, at the VIII Global Baku Forum “The World After COVID-19”

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Excellencies, friends,

It is a great pleasure to address the *Baku Global Forum 2021*, although being with you in person would be even better. We all look forward to a world after COVID-19, where we can once again freely travel and not have to keep our distance. The current situation requires societal discipline, global solidarity, a trust in scientific reason and the professional medical community, and reliable, verified sources of information.

It is too early to say how much pandemic has really changed the world. It has certainly exposed the changes already happening in the world – the extent of globalization, the generation divide, the promises and limits of digitalization, the mistrust in governments and science, the relative value of skills.

It has also exposed the underlying resilience of the nation state. When the pandemic struck, our natural instinct was to return to our homeland, in some cases even to close the border to outsiders. It was a natural reaction, but not the ideal one. No country is completely independent and isolated – we all rely on each other to a greater or lesser extent.

No country is strong enough or rich enough to resist the pandemic alone – that was perhaps one of the most useful lessons from the pandemic. Clearly, we need a multilateral approach for these global challenges, optimally within the United Nations. Multilateralism is the way to crystallize a common approach.

Here I want to commend Azerbaijan for initiating the Special Session of the UN General Assembly in December 2020 in response to the corona virus. It was an excellent example of leveraging the United Nations platform to mobilize global action against the

pandemic.

Let me mention a few aspects which will shape the world after COVID-19.

Firstly, we will see more clearly the promises and limits of digitalization. The pandemic has made us think how far we want digitalization to go. Besides all the practical benefits, we have to be careful about the misuse of social platforms to spread disinformation. In a pandemic, false information about vaccination can be literally a matter of life or death.

Why do we see this mistrust in science and the public health messages of governments? Is it really about vaccines, or a wider sense of protest? How can we rebuild rational thinking, a sense of responsibility for own health and that of our communities? Again, let me here thank Azerbaijan for its pledged support last year on the inter-regional statement directed by Latvia to the UN about combating disinformation under COVID-19 conditions!

Another aspect that increasingly shapes our future is artificial intelligence. I believe it is a major challenge in the next decade for us to ensure that machine algorithms do not influence, let alone substitute autonomous human thought.

Finally, we will one day overcome, or learn to live with, COVID-19. But we have a much bigger crisis on our hands – climate change. It is not a future scenario; it is happening now. We have vaccines against COVID-19 (if only enough people would take them). The antidote to climate change is more expensive, yet even more urgent.

Overcoming these challenges requires dialogue between individuals, within and among nations. That is why I greatly appreciate the Baku Process, launched in 2008 as a major platform for inter-religious, intercultural dialogue.

The Global Baku Forum is an excellent framework for those with leadership experience to share solutions to wide-ranging global issues. Let me wish you to enrich discussions at this Forum and the greatest wealth of all – good health!

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