

Address of the President of Latvia, Egils Levits, at the discussion 'Telling history: research, policies, communication'

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Excellences, ladies and gentlemen, dear participants,

I

Need to discover yourself and learn more about your collective experience pushes each new generation to explore its past roots. In other words, our being as a society today is largely determined by the extent to which we are ready to remember the past.

Metanarratives that inhabit our history consolidate people and maintain constant national awareness. Historic narratives are a self-reflection vehicle of a nation, a source of inspiration and rationale. Nations interpret history to defend certain values and highlight their beliefs.

II

History policy is a relatively new concept for us, but it is a vital element of any democracy History policy means that we approach our past in a structured way with multiple stakeholders, both national and professional, such as researchers, educators and creative professionals together with amateur historians, or regular members of society keen on history, covering various phases of this process.

History policy does not mean we are politicising history. On the contrary, one of the primary goals of history policy in a democracy is to ensure the autonomy of historians and independent history research.

III

In a democracy, the overall history policy must have a well-balanced set of policies. It should include history development, communication and research policies. A system supporting these history policy branches and meaningful planning of national history policy is therefore part of the art of good governance or the framework of good governance.

History policies set milestones in nation's collective memory, i.e., decide which of thousand different historic events should be remembered by all and added to the collective memory of the nation. So, we go from one milestone to another and reconstruct our past to be more aware of who we are today.

For example, the centenary of Latvia was celebrated with events that opened numerous doors for memories about important turning points for Latvian nation and statehood returning to our collective memory. There was TV series 'Red forest' about national partisans (forest brothers), series of novels 'We, Latvia, 20th century', play staged at Liepāja Theatre 'Liepāja, the capital of Latvia', are just a few of events of Latvia's centenary programme that gave Latvians a better and broader understanding of who we are and what our state and people have gone through.

In democracy, history policy should also help restore historic justice both at home and internationally. Historic justice is the history policy goal of Latvia that sets us apart from other countries for whom historic justice may not be the most pivotal element of history policy.

And today's launch of collected articles of History Commission is another important milestone in our history policy.

IV

Moral compass of the Western society allows us to draw a clear line between history policy of a democratic and autocratic or totalitarian state, because many colleagues here have also gotten the taste of Soviet history policy. What is the difference between our history policy here in Latvia and similar policies in any other democracy?

In democracy, history policy is openly discussed within intellectual dialogue. That is essential. This is the history policy approach that promotes evidence-based rivalry of interpretations about past events, current democratic values shared by society, according to structure of history.

Whereas in autocracy or totalitarianism history policy is hegemonic. It seals the history off and turns it into a weapon. The main purpose of such history policy is to boost the legitimacy of the undemocratic regime in power.

One of the main research tasks of history policy is to analyse the discipline of history among other subjects. There were no studies about the inner structures of history as a discipline in the Soviet Union, and history played a vastly different role to the one it has in modern Latvia.

V

The main task of Latvia's history policy in 1990s was to 'decommunise', let us use this neologism, the public realm, reintroduce the narrative of independent Latvia, create new memorials and commemoration traditions. That was a part of achieving historic justice that I already mentioned.

And the need to explain our unique and very distinct history to international community arose towards the end of 1990s.

VI

Both totalitarian regimes were finally morally denounced on 23 September 2008 when European Parliament proclaimed 23 August the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism. This is so far the only international document, which calls out crimes of both totalitarian regimes.

Another important Latvian history policy milestone was achieved in the field of law when European Court of Human Rights announced its ruling in the case of Konanov v. Latvia in 2010. It mentions the war crimes committed by the Red Army. Today we are discussing war crimes in a different setting, but back then it was not common to recognise that a victor can also be blamed for war crimes it has committed. This has also contributed to our understanding of history policy.

I am grateful to our foreign service and international law experts who worked really hard to achieve this court judgement.

VII

But it is also clear that Western societies and politicians are still struggling to come to terms with the consequences of both waves of occupation that swept over the Baltics. West's understanding of post-war historic justice is rooted in Nuremberg trials where only one of the sides, Nazis, were held accountable for their war crimes.

Such understanding hinders proper evaluation of historic events of the 20th century in all their entirety, as experienced by us here in Latvia.

In past 15 years politicians in our region have created several permanent cooperation platforms the aim of which is to support joint research into totalitarian regimes created by Nazis and communists. However, these networks are primarily maintained by historians and experts from Central and Eastern Europe. One of such platforms is European Parliament's informal all-party group 'Reconciliation of European Histories'. It is a European memory and conscience platform founded in 2011. This is just one of the examples of what can be done. And a lot is still to be done and completed for common European understanding of history to form. Because books about European history, unlike those of national history, naturally focus very little on parallels between the two totalitarian regimes. This remains a relatively unexplored part of European history that would contribute to more balanced understanding of history. Politicians and historians, and societies, should put more focus on that.

VIII

Fundamental elements of Latvian history policy were included in the Preamble of our constitution in 2014. Based on the provisions of the Preamble, these elements are part of democratic history policy, which allows us to interpret past events, and thus also today's processes, through a very precise legal and constitutional prism. It is very essential. Our past, our values-based understanding of the past determines the way we see current events. That is how we analyse our choices today.

IX

As far as history policy is concerned, 9 May celebrations have become quite a contentious issue. Each year we can witness celebrations of 9 May on the left bank of Daugava River, Pārdaugava. Celebrations promoted by irresponsible politicians. Celebrations glorifying the occupation of Latvia in the eyes of those that justify occupation.

Putin and his regime have created their own imperial narrative around World War II victory. It is centred around empire, glorifying its powers, military might and conquests. Russia used this imperial narrative as excuse for invading Ukraine. Such narrative rejects the idea of Ukraine as a state and nation in its own right and lays claim to Ukrainian land. As we can see, such history policies and narratives, no matter how innocent they seem, may have deep political and historical implications. They can even bring huge suffering to Europe as we see.

9 May is a loud celebration with grandiose songs and St George's ribbons fuelled by Kremlin's imperial narrative. It is a day when Russian imperial aspirations are glorified. A celebration that has no place in democratic Latvia.

I am happy that our parliament has recognised that as well.

X

We can also witness the imperial propaganda using its own history policy and narrative to create a parallel reality that has captured the minds of many in Russia and also some people here in Latvia.

It is time for them to wake up. There are no 'buts' or 'whys' anymore. Russia is committing war crimes in Ukraine. There is no partial occupation or some empire. There are no 'almost' war crimes. Let me reiterate: our understanding of history, democratic approach to it, gives us the ability to put history into perspective, a legal perspective of history and current events. The fact that there still are people who hesitate to support Ukraine, claim that we do not have enough knowledge or say that both sides are in the right, means that their moral compass is off. We need to do our best to be on the right side with other democratic countries.

As a democratic country, Latvia must ban celebrations that justify or glorify regimes and ideologies that have committed crimes against peace, humanity and other countries with whom they are at war. Law enforcement agencies must prevent any such attempts, including 9 May celebrations. That is how we can show dignity and support to victims of this aggression and war. Our humanity and common sense demand that.

XI

Discussion around history policy must now also figure out how to treat the occupation monument in Pārdaugava. And discussion is not done yet. One thing is clear, however, war in Ukraine has made the question of occupation monument as 'loaded' as ever. Responsible authorities, and Riga City Council is one of them, must find the right way to treat this monument. But it is up for public debate too, of course.

Riga City Council has been talking about signs explaining the crimes committed by occupation forces in Latvia around the occupation monument for years. And yet, we see nothing. This year, in May, monument will be surrounded with photos of war in Ukraine. It will, of course, change the way this monument is perceived. And that is exactly what history policy should do. That is great idea.

I should also emphasise that Latvia commemorates all victims of the World War II on 8 May together with the rest of Europe. And those who want to join commemorations can do so on 8 May, together with the rest of Latvia.

XII

Compared to everything that Latvian State has done until now, the main history policy focus of my presidency has been on the history of national resistance movement in Latvia. Two new special days have been added to our calendar. One is 2 March, National Partisan Armed Resistance Remembrance Day, and 17 March, National Resistance Movement Remembrance Day. Collective memory of the Latvian nation needed this. We need to remind ourselves that we were not some passive victims of occupation and fiercely resisted foreign invaders from 16 June 1940 until 21 August 1991. Resistance took many forms. There was long armed resistance, which unbelievably and miraculously continued to fight for a whole decade after the war. There were also numerous non-violent resistance groups, which eventually paved our way back to national independence. If it were not for this quiet resistance, people would not have thought of renewed independence in 1988. It was continued resistance that made us free again.

When it comes to history policy, we must also think about how we teach our history to young people and how they become part of our historical explorations. According to studies, young people have little interest in history. However, it is the ignorance towards history and our past that makes us more vulnerable and susceptible to ideological manipulation. A real concern these days. This war has seen unprecedented use of ideology and manipulative tools. Hybrid warfare has been a concern for years and democratic history policy is one of the weapons that we can use to win this war.

We can also see that our resistance movement is gaining wider international recognition. We know what happened in Stompaki swamp and other places, but we can really start to appreciate the uniqueness of such resistance movement only from the European and global perspective when we go beyond the local level. *RAND Corporation*, an influential US think tank, for example, published a study on civilian-based resistance in the Baltic States last month. It also contains useful advice on how to protect civic society in current circumstances. Research by *RAND Corporation* is largely based on works of Latvian and Baltic historians. It also highlights the importance of this unique phenomena for the resilience of democratic societies. Our experience is useful not only here in Latvia, but also beyond our borders. In addition, *RAND Corporation* is one of the firms consulting the US government

Forest Brothers: Fight for the Baltics, a short film created by NATO, also gained wide attention in 2017. Russia strongly condemned its contents. It is a film about first ten years of resistance in the Baltics. It sheds more light on armed resistance of Latvians beyond the borders of Latvia and our historians played a major role in its creation.

However, generally speaking, history of Latvian national resistance movement still remains relatively under-researched and insufficiently conceptualised.

XIII

The 29 volumes of collected articles on occupation-related events compiled and published by History Commission are a true testimony of professional, scientific and historical importance of such studies. It is also equally important for better self-awareness of our society. High scientific standards, which are essential for any research project and history policy education of society, are the main characteristic of this collection.

XIV

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today we launch the most recent volume of collected articles compiled by History Commission. It focuses on our resistance to occupying powers. It is important source of wisdom today because, on the one hand, it strengthens the social cohesion in Latvia based on the sentiment of one nation and state and, on the other hand, the role and contribution of historians in explaining our history and providing us with research has significantly increased after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This most recent, national-resistance-movement-focused collection of articles will remain a golden standard for many years to come. A source of valuable information and opinions about the particular period in the history of Latvia.

I want to thank the editors of the Volume 29 of History Commission's Collected Articles, Valters Nollendorfs and Valters Ščerbinskis, and also the whole team of authors who contributed their findings about the history of national resistance movement for this publication.

I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to all historians and editors who made the previous 28 volumes possible. You have done mammoth work, which is absolutely instrumental for better understanding of our national history. These 29 volumes form a respectable collection of history books that anyone will appreciate. They contain the most detailed and exhaustive description of our nation's 20th century history. Once again, thank you so much for that! History is not merely a scientific discipline. It is a crucial element of our nation's and state's identity, the basis for stability and cohesion among our people and our growth as a state.

Thank you!



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