

## Remarks by the President of Latvia, Egils Levits, on Latgale's development scenarios in the new geopolitical and economic conditions

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Dear people of Daugavpils, dear Latgalians, delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

I

I am absolutely delighted to be in Daugavpils today and join your discussion here in Latgale.

I am happy to see so many opinion leaders from all over Latgale here today. Your leadership in diverse sectors has made you a source of strength for others, your achievements and opinions are valued by many in Latgale and all around Latvia.

II

Closer cooperation between state and local governments is especially crucial at times like these. It allows for more precise coordination of joint efforts in strengthening people's unity and solidarity, economy and well-being, support to Ukraine and its people, response to impact from economic sanctions against Russia and Belarus.

I am very much looking forward to your views and ideas because your pragmatism is essential right now.

III

April has traditionally been the Latgale month here in Latvia. Month when we celebrate the anniversary of the seminal Latgale Congress.

In April of 1917 local community delegates from Daugavpils, Ludza and Rēzekne counties met at the Latgale Congress to agree on the historic unification of Latgale, Kurzeme and Vidzeme to form a single Latvian nation and state.

Determination of Latgale inspired the rest of Latvia to follow and form one state, Latvia. A state integrated in Western culture and values.

Decisions of Latgale Congress brought our nation much closer to proclamation of the republic on 18 November 1918. They helped us win the War of Independence and motivated Constitutional Assembly to adopt our constitution, Satversme, which remains in force to this day.

Francis Trasuns' message of united, free, independent and democratic Latvia in Europe, as part of the West, is encoded in our country's constitutional foundations.

#### IV

If we look at the political map, Latvia's eastern border is the final frontier of the Western world, with different system of values and culture on the other side of Zilupe, Pasiene and Piedruja.

But we can also say that Zilupe, Pasiene and Piedruja is where the West begins, and we are the door to European culture area.

Through Latgalian culture, traditions and lifestyle our neighbours can experience the European and Western world.

Political lines dividing cultures have traditionally been dynamic and emotionally charged. Border regions have never been these remote forgotten areas. Borders are usually inhabited by strong and sturdy people.

Border areas are usually stronger and more dynamic than central regions. They are constantly exposed to different way of thinking and other influences, which reinvigorate their inner need to assert and strengthen their own identity.

#### V

Daugavpils is a special city for Latvia and Europe.

Daugavpils is the easternmost European and Western city in Latvia.

The city that lies on the shores of Daugava is the forepost of European and Western culture and values, which has captivated and captured the imagination of many.

Many influential Latvians who have shaped Latvian, European and global art and science were born and raised in Daugavpils. Daugavpils is the city of Rainis, Marka Rothko, Pauls Mincks, Valda Zepa, Uljana Semjonova and Andris Ambainis.

Daugavpils is city with culture. Latvian culture and European culture. That is why I am also happy that Daugavpils is among cities competing for European Capital of Culture title.

Daugavpils is a diverse and dazzling European metropolis where people of various religions, ethnic origins and cultural backgrounds co-exist and co-create.

Daugavpils' culture is the amalgamation of diverse Latvian traditions inherent to our society and vital for cultural, scientific and artistic innovation.

#### VI

Latgale is very close to my heart. My wife hails from Latgale and Latgalian identity is a strong presence in our family too. Latgale is the place where I have experienced pivotal moments in life. I have been to baptisms, weddings, birthdays and even family funerals here.

I always feel at home when I meet Latgalians. There is no place like Latgale, and people so determined, persevering and mentally tough as here in Latgale.

We all have one Latvia – everyone here in Latgale, Vidzeme, Kurzeme, Zemgale and Sēlija.

## VII

Although different and diverse, we all want the same – security, peace and better future for our kids and country because we are all in the same boat.

It is no coincidence that the coat of arms and symbol of Krāslava, a town on the river, includes Viking boat with five oars and western wind blowing in its sail. Five oars in Krāslava's coat of arms stand for five traditional nationalities that co-habit there: Latvians, Russians, Belarusians, Poles and Jews.

Five oars may also stand for five traditional religions of Latgale: Catholics, Lutherans, Old Believers, Orthodox and Judaic.

Latgale is very diverse. Diversity is Latgale's *crown jewel*.

But we should never forget that we are in the same boat. We have to row in the same direction, in sync, or rapids will throw us out of the boat.

## VIII

Borders are inhabited by smart and visceral people. They can spot new trends earlier, see new things more clearly, their vision is not clouded by illusion or adoration.

When Russia's aggression against Ukraine happened 8 years ago, many people in Paris, London and Berlin still naively believed that Kremlin is ready to negotiate and achieve a peace deal on Donbas and Crimea.

But we here in the Baltics, contrary to the rest of Europe, saw things for what they were.

It was already in 1917 that Francis Trasuns who played major role in unification of Latvia took to the stage of the Congress of Latgale to foresee the geopolitical future of Latgale and the whole Latvia. 'We need to make a choice: either we join the barbaric East or cultured West!' he said. And he was a smart, cerebral man.

Trasuns' statements hundred years ago still hold true today as we witness Russia's barbaric war against Ukraine.

## IX

Children, women and old people are buried under the ruins of Ukrainian cities bombarded by Russia.

Putin's regime has declared war on Europe and the Free World.

Russian army's bloody massacre in Bucha took lives of innocent civilians and drew a clear line. A line between us, Latvia, and the democratic West it belongs to, and Russia under Putin's aggressive regime.

It nullified all compromises. There are no grey areas or neutrality anymore. There is only black and white. Good against evil. Justice against crime.

## X

We must remain united. We must stand for truth and justice. Those who say 'we don't know who is right and who is wrong' are on the side of the aggressor and its outlaw regime.

It is all clear to see for everyone who has got eyes. Everyone who has got ears. Everyone who has got brain. Everyone who has got bleeding heart.

With guns in their hands Ukrainians are now paying the highest price, with their blood and lives, for their right to be part of the Western values and free from Russian aggression.

We are also going to pay for this war, but not with our blood. We will pay~~only~~ with our euros and drastically changing our everyday concerns.

XI

We share the European and Western position on the war in Ukraine. Russia has breached international law and committed war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Ukraine has already asked international courts to adjudicate these breaches and crimes and we support Ukraine's side in Hague proceedings. International Criminal Court in Hague has already launched investigation into Russia's war crimes in Ukraine.

Latvian law enforcement agencies have also opened criminal investigations into crimes committed in Ukraine. Our law enforcement officers are collecting statements and other evidence from Ukrainian refugees to document and trace crimes and liability to individual offenders.

XII

All those who worship Kremlin's politics, justify its actions or proudly pin St George's ribbon or letter "Z" to their chest, are supporting war crimes.

In democracies, corrupt ideologies and their propagation are outside human rights safeguards. They will not be tolerated.

It was, indeed, time to outlaw Kremlin's lie-spreading media and propaganda channels. Government is already looking for modern European media substitutes that can offer good content and give people truth about global events, local news and latest information about war in Ukraine.

Transparent reporting, communication with those who are still undecided as to what is going on, is our civic duty, which requires municipal leaders to do even more to promote it.

XIII

It is time for those who ignored Latvian media outlets to realise that they are a part of this country and they should follow the local, Latvian media. It is time to recognise that as a political unit we are a nation state. All Latvians, irrespective of their background, ethnic origin or religion, share the same official language, Latvian. We all have Latvian culture and worldviews in common. Our own perspective on history of our land and state. Anyone is free to share them.

Respect the country you call 'home' or find home in a country you respect.

XIV

Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused international turmoil, but it has also unified the democratic world.

US President Joe Biden has repeatedly sternly reassured and, more recently, during the NATO Brussels Summit confirmed again that America's commitment to NATO's Article 5 is iron-clad and sacrosanct. Every inch of NATO member state territory is equal and will be defended collectively.

Latvia became a full-fledged member of NATO in 2004. This means that Krāslava and Livāni, Daugavpils and Vīļaka are as safe and secure as Berlin and Brussels, Lisbon and Vancouver or any other city in the Alliance.

Article 5 of NATO Treaty is the shield that protects Western values. Europe and NATO are as united as ever at times when rules-based international order or our values are under threat.

Geopolitical borders between cultures are very clear. Eastern border of our state, Latvia, is the border of NATO and European Union.

XV

The strong and united response of the West to Russian invasion of Ukraine and sanctions against the aggressors and their supporters will change our economy.

Energy independence and sustainable energy, investments into local renewable energy are the areas where we have lots of homework to catch up on.

Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia were the first in Europe to ban the Russian gas altogether. No Russian gas is imported from April 1.

Gas stored at Inčukalna facility will last us until autumn, giving us enough time to find alternative supply sources. We can import gas from Klaipėda LNG terminal or gas pipeline between Poland and Lithuania, which will become operational this May. We should also bring back Skulte LNG terminal project. We need to finally get the Estonia-Latvia joint off-shore wind farm project off the ground near Ainaži.

Our country is doing everything it must right now to achieve substantial energy independence as soon as possible. Latvia, like other European countries, is preparing its economy for inevitable energy price surge. Energy will never be as cheap as it were in the past, while European Green Deal is a major balancing tool that will help our economies become truly sustainable when energy prices continue to go up and fossil technologies are being phased out due to pollution.

Actions of every local administration will matter. Every local government will have to offer its constituency energy efficiency gains. We will need to switch to different energy sources and resources. Daugavpils is a good example of what is possible and what should be done.

XVI

Sanctions against Russia have clearly demonstrated that dealing with aggressor and totalitarian regime can be dangerous. We should come to terms with the fact that we can no longer do business with Russia. A new iron curtain has descended upon our eastern border, and this time we are on the side of the Free World. Curtain can only be lifted when Russia becomes democratic and returns to the civilised world.

Anyone who is willing to deal with Russia must be ready to roll the high stakes. You can do business with Russia at your own peril, without state support. Our state does not have to help companies that have lost the Russian market. Government must rather implement targeted reskilling programmes to help those who have lost their jobs as a result of that. We must help these companies find new market opportunities. New niches, supply and export markets.

State and local governments must also continue development of better social security system and new philosophy. 'Blanket' benefits are inefficient. They do more harm than good.

We must jointly find ways to make social protection more targeted and efficient. A system calibrated to help those who really need assistance.

XVII

Dear friends,

We have been working hard to make our state better and stronger. We can safely rely on what has already been done. The



progress has been significant.

Sense of freedom, work ethic and pride for fruits of our hard labour keep us going strong.

As a community, we need to be ready to respond wisely and with foresight. Resilience and adaptability to new and changing environments are our key security and societal assets.

Our lives are nothing compared to the eternity of our free state and proud region of Latgale. They will be here forever, just like Daugava flowing down its winding path.

Life and history have made Latgalians sturdy. Together we shall overcome anything.



President of Latvia will travel to Latgale to promote closer cooperation between state and local governments in new geopolitical and economic conditions

President of Latvia Egils Levits will visit Daugavpils on 4-5 April. He will meet with local government and opinion leaders from Daugavpils and other parts of Latgale to encourage them to deepen the...

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