

Speech by the President of Latvia Egils Levits at the field session of the Latvian Academy of Sciences 'Next to Russia: historical legacy, present and future challenges'

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Egils Levits



Dear President of the Latvian Academy of Sciences,

Dear Archbishop, Mr. Zemītis, Mr. Streičs,

Ladies and gentlemen,

In my speech, I will try to emphasise those issues which are important for the whole of Latvia, but especially for Latgale. These are two issues: security and decolonisation, or overcoming our past.

I

Since the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, Latgale increasingly has tended to be seen in the light of security risks.

But in my view, Latgale symbolises a much broader set of challenges that any neighbouring country of Russia has to face. Of course, Latvia too.

Therefore, I will talk about these big underlying issues, which are even more relevant here in Latgale.

To be in the neighbourhood of Russia is to be in the neighbourhood of a country that has been overwhelmed by a sense of loss that it is no longer an empire, that it has lost its territorial influence, its colonies.

This is the post-colonial pain of the former empire.

Russia's aggressive and criminal behaviour is driven by the resentment that the peoples of the dependent lands and colonies have 'dared' to free themselves from the centre of power and domination of the former empire.

II

Let's be realistic - nothing will change in relations with Russia in the foreseeable future, so there is no room for sentiment and naive hopes for friendly coexistence.

Therefore, the security of the countries of NATO's Eastern flank, including Latvia, means deterring Russia from any aggressive adventures towards the West.

This has also been a priority of my presidency.

III

In close cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, coordinating requirements with the other two Baltic leaders, finding the support of the B9 countries, we have managed to significantly strengthen the defence of the Eastern flank over the last two years. If I am talking about NATO's Eastern flank, I am also talking about Latvia in the most direct way.

Usually, this has meant patient and reasoned negotiations with the leaders of other NATO countries.

I would like to stress that it is by no means a given that other countries, their leaders and their societies are aware that they have to stand in solidarity with Ukraine or with the countries of NATO's Eastern flank, including Latvia.

Let us ask ourselves how often we think about the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict, the war in Tigray, Yemen or now Sudan. If we were still to send substantial aid there, there would not be many who would say that we should be actively involved.

IV

Dear friends,

The war in Ukraine is being viewed in a similar way by leaders, societies in much of the world that we call the 'Global South'.

They see, of course, that Russia is doing wrong here, unjustly, but it is not something that is so important as to take sides one way or the other.

These countries are also interested in Russian and, even more so, Chinese investment and military aid, where the unpleasant questions of democracy and human rights are not asked.

However, it is not only the Global South that we need to convince. We must also convince the politicians of our allies, the Western countries, because they, in turn, must convince their electorates of the need to show practical solidarity with Ukraine, NATO's Eastern flank countries, including Latvia.

They have to explain to their voters why, instead of better financing their health system, increasing pensions and benefits, the budget has to increase military spending, send aid to Ukraine, increase the number of soldiers here in Latvia.

Our task, as Latvian politicians and diplomats, is to constantly provide them with arguments and reinforce their conviction that this is necessary.

Moreover, it is not enough to explain it once. Because, as with any human being, what is once said pales with time. You have to do it again and again, with the same and additional arguments.

The good news is that we have strong arguments on our side. Living next to an aggressive, historically and currently imperialist Russia, we see the dangers of Russia.

V

Our historical and current experience has taught us to see the far-reaching consequences of this aggressiveness, not only for us, but also for Europe and the world. This is what can attract the attention of our allies and strengthen their solidarity with us.

However, we must be able to explain it in terms that others can understand, in terms that are easy to accept. Our message has to fit into the world-view of our Western allies, into their thinking.

I have to say that my Western experience has been useful in this respect.

Among other things, Latvia has also promoted various proposals in international relations and politics, including a proposal for the establishment of a special international tribunal which, like the Nuremberg Tribunal, could try the crime of Russian aggression against Ukraine.

But we must not relax. We must invest skills and resources in our international recognition and visibility.

That is why Latvia's campaign for election to the UN Security Council in 2025 is important. Of course, it is good to be on the UN Security Council, but this campaign has an intrinsic value in that we talk to others all the time so that they recognise Latvia and Latvia's arguments in international relations.

Incidentally, our hockey players did that well a few days ago

VI

In the light of the constant and patient work of Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania and Poland in explaining the geopolitical realities of our region, a new strategic concept has been adopted at the NATO Madrid Summit in 2022, which, among other things, envisages a comprehensive and coordinated approach to strengthening the defence of the Eastern flank and, in particular, the Baltic States.

The new strategy envisages that the enemy is 'repelled' on the external border of NATO countries (so, close by), rather than reclaiming territory after the enemy has entered. This is a major shift in NATO strategy, which is particularly important for Latgale.

The Russian war in Ukraine has shown that the Baltic States are not satisfied with the previous concept of deterrence, which was that once the Russians have entered, the territory is recaptured. We no longer subscribe to that.

Living next door to Russia means that we need to invest heavily in our own defence, because investment in armaments, in defence, in this historical situation, means investment in peace.

The enemy will not attack if he knows that he will lose by attacking. The enemy will only lose if we have a credible defence capability. For us, i. e. for Latvia, together with our NATO allies.

In a month and a half we will have the next NATO summit in Vilnius, where this concept will be further refined, including the defence plans. Of course, there is also the question of future relations between NATO and Ukraine.

VII

Dear colleagues,

Russia's war against Ukraine has also highlighted the remnants of Soviet occupation and colonisation in our own country.

We are still forced to deal with the consequences of Russia's colonial policy, both in Latgale and in other regions of Latvia.

The remnants of colonialism have become so ingrained in our daily lives and minds that a large part of society has become accustomed to them, does not recognise them and is living with them.

But they continued to poison our society for more than 30 years. For 30 years, we have continued to walk down streets named after the perpetrators of the occupation. For 30 years, we have accepted that ignorance of the national language, Latvian, is not an obstacle to getting a job, but ignorance of Russian can become one.

The Russian language is still the dominant second language in schools, even though Latvia has long been part of the European cultural sphere and has nothing to do with the former Russian or Soviet empires.

Over the past year, we have substantially cleansed the public space of the signs glorifying the Soviet occupation regime and have focused attention on this very issue of decolonisation.

That's exactly what I mean - the decolonization of our public space. That is how this process should be viewed. Because these signs are not politically neutral. Their point is to mark Russia here in Latvia.

This applies not only to the Soviet signs, but also to the signs left in the public space of the Russian Empire.

That is why the decision has finally been taken that, from the 2026/2027 school year, the second foreign language in schools should be an official language of the European Union, not Russian.

VIII

The specific cultural landscape and historical heritage of Latgale raises the question of the future objectives of social cohesion policy.

The Constitution guarantees the right of national minorities to preserve their language and culture. This is the right and free choice of every person. No one is threatening them or going to take them away. On the contrary, the state supports it.

However, for a democratic society to function, a common conversation is necessary, and this conversation can only take place in the national language of Latvia, which is common to all Latvian residents, regardless of nationality.

Therefore, in my opinion, the most historically significant decision of the 13th Saeima is the transition of schools to teaching in the national language from the 2025/2026 school year.

IX

But this is not enough. Knowing Latvian does not mean loyalty. A cohesive society also needs some important value points. These include, in particular, an understanding of Latvia's geopolitical affiliation and, undoubtedly, an attitude towards the nodal points of history, i. e. the occupation of Latvia.

The litmus test for social cohesion is Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

We see in the polls that only about 1/3 of the Russian-speaking population in Latvia condemns the Russian invasion of Ukraine, while ¼ is on Russia's side. The rest are in favour of peace, i. e. they do not know what to say.

It is true that support for Russia is slowly but surely declining, and support for Ukraine is increasing.

Thus, we can say from these polls that about 1/3 of the Russian-speaking population, 30 years after the end of the occupation, stands by the Constitution of Latvia.

Is 1/3 a lot or a little? Here we should take into account how most of their parents or grandparents ended up in Latvia - people who were systematically sent by the Soviet occupation authorities to colonise Latvia after the Second World War.

X

I would like to point out that the cowardly, hushed, shameful telling of the colonial history of Latvia's occupation period over the

past 30 years, in which Soviet citizens sent here play a prominent role, has delayed the process of democratic self-reflection of these newcomers and their descendants for too long.

It is precisely such a process of democratic self-reflection that is necessary for people to understand the political context of why they or their ancestors were directed to Latvia, and to understand that, when they are here in a free, independent, democratic Latvia, they have to integrate on the basis of the values of our democratic, Latvian state and to sever their ties of sentimental loyalty with their country of origin, where an aggressive, criminal regime reigns.

I know it is not easy. It was also not easy for the Algerian French at the time to understand why the indigenous people of Algeria no longer wanted to be part of France. Because it requires a critical examination of imperialism and colonialism as such, and the discovery of the roots of unconscious imperialist and colonialist messages in the world view shaped by one's family and immediate environment. Yes, it is indeed not easy.

But the long silence on this aspect of Latvian history creates a pathology in the worldview of both Russians and Latvians.

We have been a free country for 30 years, but still a significant number of Latvians have not mentally left the Russian space.

For example, they are uncomfortably disturbed by the civic campaign of the last year for Latvian language to finally take its rightful place in the public sphere as the state language.

This pathology of the mentality of a colonised people was precisely analysed by Frantz Fanon, the theoretician of the anti-colonialist movement and psychoanalyst, in his work *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Black skin, white masks), published in 1952.

In this theoretical work, which underpinned the anti-colonial movement in the 1950s and later led to the collapse of the British and French colonial empires, we will find interesting parallels with the continued inability of some of our Latvian compatriots to shed the remnants of this colonial message in their world view. Moreover, without realising it. Fanon believed that in such pathological cases only asking the right and radical questions and trying to formulate honest answers to them could help.

XI

Latvia's national integration policy does not impose its choice on anyone, but offers the possibility of forming one's belonging to a modern, democratic, Latvian society.

It is one's own choice to accept this offer.

Moreover, we do not want integration to be only superficial. Of course, the Latvian language is very important. But I emphasise again that this is not enough. At least as important is integration into our Latvian worldview, culture and values.

I see a unified education system in our common national language as an effective way to achieve this. And we will only start this from the 2025/2026 school year.

However, just as important is honest, objective self-reflection of adults and, in many cases, young people, which would enable them to recognise and critically evaluate the imperialist message of Russia in their families, at school, especially in so-called minority schools, and on social networks.

This is where we need to be helpful. Both the school and the Latvian society must be principled in our message and in our clear vision of the world; we must be friendly and accepting of those who want to be with us.

I hope that during this meeting we will be able to discuss these strategically important issues, which are important for the whole of Latvia, but even more so here in Latgale.

Thank you!



<https://www.president.lv/en/article/speech-president-latvia-egils-levits-field-session-latvian-academy-sciences-next-russia-historical-legacy-present-and-future-challenges>