



Latvijas Republikas Valsts prezidenta kanceleja Prezidenta preses dienests

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Address by the President at the Saeima on 17th June 2004

Madam Chairperson of the Saeima,
Distinguished members of Parliament,
Ladies and gentlemen!

The most striking year in the modern history of Latvia has transpired. I would like to thank the current and former convocations of Parliament for your very necessary work that, in combination with the efforts of the executive power and NGOs, as well as the support from all our friends and allies, has helped us to achieve full-fledged return of Latvia into the European and Transatlantic area. For modern history this is the time for striking a balance, for you personally this is the time for an evaluation of your performance as members of parliament in this past half-term of your office.

For the first time in its history Latvia has taken part in elections to the European Parliament. First and foremost I extend my gratitude to those over half a million individuals, who managed to combine the agendas of Latvia and Europe and cast their vote. The fact that in Latvia the proportion of participation in the elections was considerably higher than that in many other new EU member states and sufficiently high also compared to that of the old member states, testifies to a conscious action.

However the generally low proportion of participation in the elections to the European Parliament sends a signal of alarm pertaining to the capacity of this international agency to activate electorate. One of the possible roads to an explanation seems to lead back to the revision of the role of national parliaments and search for new forms of communication with the electorate. Although small countries, such as Latvia, no doubt, has proportionally few votes in this chamber of representatives, we must not forget that these are our votes and for this reason it is very important, how well they will speak there to be heard. In other countries, as well the results of the elections to the European Parliament have been in favour of the parties in opposition, rather than those in the position. This fact also sends a certain signal of alarm to all governments. In case of Latvia, the success of the nationalist right wing reminds us of the concern that the electorate feels for the preservation of our national identity in the community of 25 countries, of its particular eagerness to protect our language and cultural heritage. Let all people's representatives of this new level always remember the common interests of Latvia as a state and use the opportunities presented by democracy in a way loyal to Latvia.

In case of Latvia, the assessment of the results of the elections to the European Parliament has taken place simultaneously with the drawing of conclusions about the passage of the magic 100 days in office of the current government. In the period between March and May of this year the state had to fulfil a very long list of urgent tasks in order to become a full-fledged part of the European Union. This government, in co-operation with parliament, has spared no effort in a very tense and demanding tempo of work to fulfil the relevant requirements and for this I would like to thank you all, on behalf of the state.

From the perspective of national interests, stability is the main precondition for the capacity of government and development of state. All governments since the restoration of independence, minority governments including, have been able to attract the majority of votes in each voting and to pursue an unchanged foreign policy course towards the

membership of this state in the EU and NATO. Now, when our main foreign policy goals have been reached, domestic issues more than ever will centre on the priorities of budget allocations. Amendments to the budget and elaboration of the budget for the next year will serve as a test of the government. I very much hope that in this process we shall be able to see far-sighted vision of the development of the state, guarantees of our capacity to profit from the funds of the EU and readiness to invest in fields such as science and education, which are so very necessary for the prospects of the future growth of the state.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In 1940 this date, the 17th June brought to the history of Latvia tragedy that was not realised on that day yet. Although the Saeima of Latvia has adopted Declaration on the Occupation of Latvia and this document has been submitted to all UN member states, we must continue to pursue this matter to a consistent resolution. It is not for Latvia alone that the issue pertaining to the condemnation of the crimes committed by the totalitarian Communism is pending, thus we must present this issue to international audience and international institutions. In view of the shared destinies of the three Baltic nations, in the future much closer co-operation should take place in the explanation of the fact of occupation to international audience, engaging in these efforts historians, lawyers, economists and other experts from the three Baltic States. The Historians' Commission of Latvia must definitely continue to contribute to the spread of objective information in the whole world about these crimes against humanity. Our harsh experience of the past could serve as a warning, in order to prevent similar injustice from happening elsewhere in the world. In contrast, the European-style Latvia of today is a successful example of fast and efficient changes and restoration of democracy. Latvia's experience could be of essential assistance to other countries in Europe and beyond, particularly to those countries, which are still under the rule of occupation regimes.

The historical experience of losing our freedom and democracy allows us better to understand why they are so precious. On the background of the panorama of systems of administration functioning in the world, Latvia was born as a parliamentary republic, side-by-side with monarchies, constitutional monarchies, presidential states and, yes indeed, also authoritarian regimes of different types. Latvia, same as the other nations in Central and Eastern Europe, has drained the cup of the latter to the dregs. Violent expressions of authoritarianism, fanaticism and extremism through the threat of terrorism know no border in the contemporary world and they spare nobody.

Nowadays struggle for security takes ever-new expressions and requires from our soldiers the capacity to take heavy risk in different far-away spots of the world. Today, when the nation is saying farewell to the Latvian soldier who fell in Iraq, on behalf of Latvia I would like once again to express the deepest respect and gratitude of the nation to soldier Olafs Baumanis for his courage, professionalism and valour. As a soldier of peace-keeping mission he lost his life while striving to ensure that many others may live theirs. Now he is going to join the ranks of Latvian heroes in the next world and the entire Latvia shares sorrow with his near ones.

The year of 2004 will enter the history of Latvia as the beginning of a new era of development. Latvia now is an independent, free, democratic and full-fledged member of the EU and NATO. Very much has been achieved in a short period of history, yet we are facing new challenges. We have entered the European Union as the poorest of the member countries and we will have to maintain the current excellent speed of growth in order to achieve a higher level of prosperity in a maximum short time. We must exert maximum effort to catch up with other states and eventually, hopefully to overtake at least some of them. I am confident that we can do it, however, it will require from us ability to think in the categories of the state and to mobilise our efforts for common goals.

Democracy has given us the freedom of assembly and expression, whose paramount expression is the parliamentary system. The Saeima represents the main currents of

opinion existing in the nation and each member of the Saeima is as legitimate representative of the people as any other. Every one of you represents a concrete part of the nation. The people have delegated its political power to you and our Constitution normally grants such trust to you for a period of four years. No matter how hard it may be, members of the Saeima must be able to achieve harmony in work, in order both to form and support a capable government and to be in capacity adequately to carry out their legislative functions. The state needs a leadership, the state must be able to make decisions and to implement them. Ability to permit a maximum degree of the freedom of expression, while not falling into chaos and paralysis is the indicator of mastery of democratic parliamentarianism. The position must be lucid in its stand, while not losing the ability to hear and listen to the thoughts and suggestions of the opposition. Diversity of views is an irretrievable element of life and it is for this reason that parliamentary debates play such an important role in political processes. Argument is the mother of truth, disputes mean the ability freely to express one's views and reach a common resolution accepted by the majority, that is often much better than any of the original proposals.

It is praiseworthy that issues pertaining to the quality of political process have been among discussion topics for Latvian politicians as well. The world is full of ideas of how to improve the political process and raise its quality. Now we too have the chance to take part in the continued growth and improvement of democracy as a system.

Debates are the foundation of parliamentary democracy, yet discussions among politicians must never become a goal in itself, they must never turn populist and politicianian. In a political discourse one must be able to draw the line between a dialogue with the electorate and hampering of national interests or placing the burden of responsibility on the people's shoulders. Absorption in discussions must not become fruitless and hamper the pursuit of the daily task of either the parliament or government to ensure reaching and achieving of goals of national importance. Even more so, debates in the Saeima must serve as an example, as a paragon and standard for discussions in society at large. For this reason I urge you to ensure that the most topical draft laws that you consider always meet the topical interests of the state and needs of society. It would be unacceptable if battles among the members of parliament about some sphere of interest were separated from the world outside and eventually not only failed to give the expected benefit but paralysed the work of whole industries.

In these days I have proposed the Parliament to adopt a Law on Ombudsman's Office and submitted for your consideration draft law whose substance is to ensure practical functioning of the laws adopted by the Parliament itself. We often hear about the separation of power from the people, authorities are reproached of losing touch with the people, of lack of interest in the implementation of laws that they themselves have adopted.

An independent ombudsman, who is not associated with executive or judicial power, may act as a mediator between people and power structures, preventing disputes from becoming conflicts that are taken to court. The fact that more and more states (by now their number has exceeded 110) choose the Ombudsman's institution as one of the guarantees of the democratic process, testifies to the efficiency of such institution.

Latvia's goal is a united political nation as a guarantee of the development, security and peace in the state. A multi-cultural nation, loyal to the national interests of Latvia and able to communicate in the Latvian as the official language. We wish to build a state, where there would be no basis for inter-ethnic or religious conflicts, where there would be no place for extremism or fanaticism and where a person would be identified by his or her personality, works and values rather than by his or her ethnic background. To achieve harmonious co-existence of different groups of society, a high-quality, considered and clearly presented process of legislation is indispensable. Members of parliament must be aware of their huge responsibility in sensitive matters, such as education, public integration and social issues. Each of suggestions in these fields, becoming a provision in legislation, causes

consequences that directly concern individuals and public processes (and not only the electorate).

A year ago, as I stood here in front of you as a re-elected President, I addressed you, urging by joint efforts to elaborate action programmes, to outline guidelines and emphasis of Latvia's development, and to realise what are the values that we can agree on, what are the goals and principles for us as a state, which must define its place in Europe and the world. It means the analysis of the strategy of national development.

Jointly with the Prime Minister we have signed a resolution on the establishment of Commission for Strategic Analysis and I hope that the executive power, by assuming political responsibility for the functioning of such structure, will apply the results of the Commission's work in the elaboration of governmental policies.

Latvia and Europe are now one whole: new Latvia in new Europe. Latvia is not at all completed yet, however it already pursues her own way in the world, with the heritage of her own fundamental national and European values. The time is ripe to think freely and to pursue the vision that would ensure the growth of Latvia among the rest of 450 million Europeans and consolidate Europe as a strong player among other global bulwarks of power.

If Latvia is clearly aware of her interests in the wide world, it will continue to win an increasingly important role in international political, economic, cultural, sports and other public processes. Currently the EU, NATO and UN are undergoing essential reforms and we have the chance with our ideas and work to take part in successful development of these organisations. Today we have a unique chance to balance the global development and small countries could play an essential role in the strengthening of dialogue among civilisations.

A democratic state is based on the awareness of citizens of their belonging to a community of citizens or a civic nation, it is based on individual awareness of his or her privileges and co-responsibility for everything that is taking place. This awareness of civic belonging and responsibility, in combination with the rule of law, forms the strongest foundation of a just and stable state. At this point this young democracy of ours would benefit from a certain re-evaluation, which would serve as a good reference point for the continued process of improvement. Such a round-up, a kind of an audit of democracy could reflect how each of us feels in his or her country and how feel those who have recently joined the community of citizens.

Ladies and gentlemen,

On this date five years ago the Saeima of Latvia placed its trust in me that throughout these years I have highly valued and tried to justify. Thank you for your confidence in me and let us continue our co-operation for the benefit of Latvia!