

**Opening Statement  
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Mr. President,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my honour and privilege to address you today when we consider Latvia's second national report in the framework of the Universal Periodic Review. Latvia strongly supports this peer review which provides equal terms for every country's human rights assessment. This mechanism serves both as a reminder of international human rights obligations for States and a catalyst for change. Its strength lies in its universality. Latvia has actively and constructively participated in previous sessions of the Working Group and we will continue in the same vein.

Our national report was elaborated by an inter-institutional working group. In addition we consulted with non-governmental organizations and the Ombudsman's Office. Their opinion and comments were taken into careful consideration and were reflected in the report.

I would like to use this opportunity and thank the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for its compilations, which were very useful in the preparation process before our review. I also thank the States that sent us questions in advance. Our delegation will reflect on the issues raised throughout this session.

Latvia's delegation is comprised of representatives from a wide range of national institutions working in the field of human rights. All of us look forward to open and constructive dialogue during this session.

Mr. President,

At the outset, let me reaffirm Latvia's steadfast commitment to **democracy, human rights and the rule of law**. Our history has taught us that freedom and human rights should never be taken for granted. Latvia restored independence and regained freedom in 1990 after decades of Soviet occupation. Since then protection of human rights have been an indispensable part of Government's policies, both foreign and domestic.

Latvia has demonstrated its commitment in the field of human rights by undertaking a broad range of **international obligations**. Latvia has acceded to the major United Nations human rights instruments and regularly submits reports to their monitoring mechanisms. In addition Latvia is a member of various regional organizations mandated to promote human rights. Therefore our human rights record is scrutinized on the regular basis, including through binding judgements of the European Court of Human Rights.

Latvia is proud to be a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council since 2015. This platform enables us to further advance our human rights priority areas – gender equality, freedom of expression and participation of civil society. We also continue our long-term initiative to encourage States to issue a standing invitation to all United Nations Special Procedures mandate holders. In 2012 Latvia welcomed the Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt. We will remain open to visits by the United Nations experts in the future.

Participation of **civil society** is a backbone of every democracy. Latvia has ensured that non-governmental organizations can freely engage in decision-making process at all levels. The collaboration between non-governmental organizations and public authorities is being constantly strengthened. For example, at the moment there are more than thousand non-governmental organizations involved in the advisory councils. The Memorandum on Cooperation between Non-governmental Organizations and the Cabinet of Ministers, adopted in 2014, aims to further advance the role of civil society in public administration.

Wide and affordable access to the new technologies has promoted more **transparent and inclusive governance**. Latvia is among the few countries where the meetings of the Latvian Parliament and the Government are broadcasted live on the Internet. Every resident can use a variety of e-services, including to declare annual income, apply for undergraduate study programmes and to declare the place of residence online. Furthermore every citizen can propose new legislation initiatives by using the internet platform "My Voice". Each initiative signed by at least 10,000 citizens is referred to the Parliament, which is obliged to consider it as a legislative proposal.

Mr. President,

Since the examination of the first report of Latvia in 2011, we have taken many steps to implement the accepted recommendations in order to further strengthen the protection of human rights in Latvia. Let me draw your attention to some remarkable developments and achievements since our first review.

In 2014 the Parliament adopted **the Preamble** of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia. The Preamble reasserts the principles of democracy, pluralism and human rights embodied in our Constitution. It also reaffirms the rights of persons belonging to national minorities to preserve and develop their language and ethnic and cultural identity.

In October 2013 **Amendments to the Citizenship Law** came into force, after more than two years of meticulous work. First, considering Latvia's historical background, currently increasing mobility of persons and the need to sustain ties with citizens all over the world, the Amendments significantly extended the scope for dual citizenship. In this respect the Amendments followed the best practices in the world. Second, with the Amendments the procedure for granting citizenship and naturalization process has been further simplified. For example, the Latvian citizenship is granted automatically to children of stateless persons and non-citizens.

I'm also pleased to note that Latvia's national human rights institution – **the Ombudsman Office** – in March 2015 was accredited in the International Coordinating Committee of National Human Rights Institutions. The Committee granted to it the accreditation status "A" thus recognizing its full compliance with the highest international standards. The Government has constantly increased its funding to ensure the effective functioning of the Office.

I would also like to note that in order to ensure a more efficient, objective and independent investigation of criminal offences committed by officials of law enforcement agencies, a new institution – **the Internal Security Office** – commenced its operation in November 2015 under the supervision of the Minister of Interior.

Latvia has further deepened its **international commitments** by acceding to the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights on the abolition of the death penalty. Latvia has also ratified the Council of Europe Convention on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. We will continue to evaluate the possibility of acceding to other international human rights instruments in due course.

Now I would like to highlight some specific human rights areas in more detail.

Latvia has worked towards **gender equality** and women's empowerment. We fully share the view that gender equality is a goal in itself as well as precondition for meeting many challenges. In Latvia the principles of gender equality are taken into account in every policy planning and policy making process. The Gender Equality Action Plan for 2012 – 2014 aimed at efficient, integrated and coordinated approach to gender equality. In the framework of the Plan a wide range of activities were implemented, including measures to promote the reconciliation of work and family life and public awareness raising campaigns. We have also paid a particular attention to active participation of fathers in child care.

I'm glad to note that our achievements have been recognized internationally. In 2015 the Global Gender Gap Report ranked Latvia among the 20 leading countries in the field of gender equality. The report concludes that Latvia has fully closed gender gap in the fields of health and survival as well as education attainment. Our strength is also women's economic participation. One third of all enterprises in Latvia belong to women. Furthermore 30% of companies listed on stock exchange are managed by women, which is the third highest indicator in the European Union. Women also comprise 65% of highest education graduates and are highly represented in science and justice system.

At the same time there is always a room for further improvement, for example, as regards the gender pay gap. To address remaining challenges we are currently elaborating a new policy planning document.

Mr. President,

In recent years Latvia has intensified its efforts to eliminate **domestic violence**. Firstly, the legal framework has been improved. In 2014 complex amendments to legal acts introducing temporary protection against violence entered into force. I would like to emphasize that although the amendments are recent, the case law is already advanced. In order to further strengthen the legal framework, Latvia has undertaken to accede to the Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence against Women and Domestic Violence by 2018. Secondly, we have focused on provision of quality social rehabilitation services. Starting from 2015 the State funded social rehabilitation services for adult victims and perpetrators of violence are available. Such services may include consultation provided by a lawyer, a psychologist or a social worker. Also person's accommodation expenses are covered, if necessary. Thirdly, a variety of activities aimed at expert training and public awareness-raising on domestic violence have been implemented.

As a regional leader in the fight against **human trafficking**, Latvia has continued to strengthen its efforts in this field. A number of improvements to the normative framework have been made, for example, specifying a definition of human trafficking. We have been focusing on building the capacity of law enforcement agencies to combat human trafficking and sham marriages. Another crucial focus area has been assistance to the victims of human trafficking.

Since 2011 the State funding for social rehabilitation has increased considerably. In 2013 State compensation for victims of human trafficking was introduced. Furthermore victims who participate in criminal proceedings on human trafficking are entitled to receive additional support services.

Latvia has also reinforced measures aimed at improvement of **conditions in places of imprisonment**. For example, in the period from 2013 till 2014 a comprehensive audit was conducted in order to collect information about conditions in places of imprisonment and to develop proposals for their improvement. As a follow up, it has been ensured that the accommodation for imprisoned persons is in full compliance with international standards for residential area. This standard was also enshrined in the respective legal acts.

A considerable progress has been achieved with regard to the reduction of the number of imprisoned persons. I would like to highlight the Amendments to the Criminal Law of 2013 reforming the system of criminal penalties. As a result, the use of alternative penalties to deprivation of liberty has increased rapidly. In addition the electronic monitoring system was introduced in 2015. Due to these and other reforms, in the period from 2011 till 2015 the number of imprisoned persons has been reduced by 30%.

Several delegations inquired about the steps taken to eliminate **discrimination**. Legislation of Latvia prohibits discrimination of any kind. Anti-discrimination provisions are enshrined in the Constitution and various sectoral laws. In 2013 the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination against Natural Persons – Performers of Economic Activities was adopted. Furthermore in 2014 the Criminal Law was amended providing criminal liability for discrimination due to racial, national, ethnic or religious belonging or for the violation of the prohibition of any other type of discrimination, if a substantial harm is caused thereby.

In line with the Guidelines on National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy a wide range of measures have been implemented. These include further development of discrimination monitoring system, review of existing anti-discrimination norms, educational and awareness-raising events. For example, the project “Different People. Various Experiences. One Latvia.” with the support of the Government was carried out from 2013 till 2014. During the project the cooperation network among public administration institutions and non-governmental organizations was established and measures aimed at Roma integration with a focus on education were carried out.

We have been working to reduce discrimination against **Roma** and to ensure them equal opportunities, especially in the field of education. In 2011 a package of national policy measures for integration of Roma was adopted. Particular attention has been paid to the field of education. I would especially like to note the programme for professional training of teacher's assistants with Roma background. The institutional framework has also been improved by establishing the Advisory Council on Roma integration issues and the Network of Regional Experts.

Latvia has also worked to prevent discrimination against the **LGBT persons**. We have paid attention to training of experts, including from the State Police, on issues related to protection of LGBT rights. Latvia has also established a good cooperation with the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and the Council of Europe in this area. I would also like to mention the Europride, which peacefully took place in Riga in June 2015. The event was co-organized by LGBT rights organizations in coordination with the Government and law enforcement agencies. In the margins of the event a large number of conferences, seminars, discussions and exhibitions were held.

As regards **hate crimes**, the Criminal Law provides for criminal liability for incitement to national, ethnic, racial or religious enmity. In addition racist, national, ethnic or religious motives are defined as an aggravating circumstance. Furthermore the Criminal Law provides criminal liability for act aimed towards inciting hatred or enmity because of the gender, age, disability of a person or any other characteristics, if substantial harm has been caused thereby. The responsible authorities have stepped up their efforts to monitor hate speech in the virtual environment, while respecting the right to freedom of expression. Due attention have also been paid to the training of experts from the State Police College and the State Police. For example, in 2014 the State Police and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe concluded a memorandum on training in the field of combatting hate crimes.

Mr. President,

Latvia is proud of its tolerant, open and multilingual society. There are more than 150 ethnicities living in our country. We have the second highest multilingualism indicator in the European Union. National minorities and their culture are an integral component of Latvia's society and cultural space. Latvia's **society integration policy** ensures protection of their rights and enjoyment of their culture, language and traditions. National minorities are socially and politically active, they engage in policy-planning and decision-making processes.

Latvia offers a unique education system, with State financed minority education programmes in seven languages: Russian, Polish, Belarusian, Ukrainian, Estonian, Lithuanian and Hebrew. At least 60% of subjects are being taught in Latvian or bilingually. Measures aimed at improving the quality of bilingual education are being implemented on the regular basis. The results of centralised national examinations demonstrate that examination results in general education schools are similar to those in schools implementing national minority education programmes. Remarkably, students at national minority schools earn even higher scores in some subjects - like maths, history and foreign languages. The number of students belonging to national minorities who have chosen the Latvian language as a language of examination has increased from 60% in 2011 to 79% in 2015.

In order to improve the Latvian language proficiency, the Government provides free language courses. In recent years the Latvian language proficiency among persons belonging to national minorities has improved considerably, especially among the youth. Today more than 94% of persons belonging to national minorities can communicate in Latvian in comparison with 23% in 1989.



Mr. President,

After the restoration of Latvia's independence in 1990, the temporary status of "non-citizen" was established. This status was granted to persons, who had immigrated during the period of Soviet occupation as a result of deliberate migration policy of the Soviet authorities in the occupied territories and who lost their USSR citizenship after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. These persons had never been citizens of the Republic of Latvia or their descendants.

Latvian authorities have always stressed that the status of non-citizens is of a temporary nature. Latvian non-citizens are not stateless. It is clearly stated in the relevant legislative act. All preconditions for a successful naturalization process have been created. It has been repeatedly simplified in accordance with the international standards. Naturalization procedure in Latvia is one of the most liberal in Europe. The indicator measuring the inclusiveness of the naturalization procedure in Latvia is above the European Union average. Currently almost 150,000 persons have made a choice to become citizens of Latvia. At the same time non-citizens enjoy the same social guarantees and most of the rights guaranteed to Latvian citizens. They enjoy full protection under the law both in Latvia and while living or travelling abroad.

As I already underlined at the beginning of my statement, in accordance with the Amendments to the Citizenship Law of 2013, the citizenship acquisition and naturalization process was further simplified, including by granting the Latvian citizenship automatically to children of stateless persons and non-citizens. Since the adoption of the Amendments the number of new-borns whose parents are both non-citizens that are registered as Latvia's citizens has risen from 52% to 82%. In total, 99% of children born in Latvia in 2015 are citizens of Latvia.

At the same time Latvia houses 179 stateless persons. Being state party to the 1954 Convention Latvia provides protection to those people as required by our international obligations. I would appreciate if during the interactive dialogue this distinction would be clearly observed and correct references would be used to either abovementioned groups.

Mr. President,

Increased migration and forced displacement are among the greatest humanitarian challenges of our time. To tackle them, long-term and comprehensive solutions are required. In January 2016 a new Asylum Law entered into force in Latvia. The new law further widens the scope of the rights of asylum seekers. For example, the State funded legal assistance services will be made more available.

Latvia has shown its solidarity with the international community by committing itself to admit 531 **asylum seekers** over the next two years. In November 2015 the Government approved the Action Plan for the admission of asylum seekers. The Plan envisages establishing an appropriate system for the relocation and resettlement as well as for the sustainable integration of the persons in a clear need of international protection.

One of our focus areas will be measures aimed at promoting successful integration of asylum seekers into Latvia's society. Social mentor services will be provided. The Government will offer Latvian language courses and practical training on issues such as employment, education, health care, social security, non-discrimination and others. It is also planned to establish an Information Center, which will provide different services, including psychological, judicial, social worker counselling. Specific courses will also be offered to specialists who work with asylum seekers. Furthermore public awareness raising activities will be organized on the regular basis.

Mr. President,

Distinguished delegates,

I would like to conclude by emphasizing Latvia's strong determination to continue its efforts with a view to further advance human rights protection in our country.

I thank you for your attention and look forward to your recommendations and questions.