**Opening Statement by
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**Ministry of Foreign Affairs**

**Republic of Latvia**

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Madam President,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen!

It is my great honour to address you today to present Latvia’s third national report in the framework of the Universal Periodic Review. Latvia strongly supports the UPR mechanism, and considers it of major importance in enhancing human rights. This mechanism creates equal terms for assessing every country's compliance with its human rights obligations, and establishes constructive dialogue between various actors, including non-governmental organisations and civil society. The UPR recalls these international human rights obligations, assesses progress, and indicates the way forward. Latvia has actively and constructively participated in previous sessions of the UPR Working Group, and will continue doing so in the future.

Latvia’s third national report covers the period between 2016 and 2020. At the national level it was prepared by an inter-institutional working group. Non-governmental organisations were able to provide their comments that were taken into careful consideration and reflected in the report.

Today, it is my honour to head Latvia`s delegation comprised of representatives from a wide range of national institutions. Let me present Latvia’s main achievements, good practices and challenges since 2016, and address implementation of the recommendations received in the 2nd Cycle. I will also answer some of the questions sent in advance. We all look forward to an open and constructive dialogue.

Madam President,

Latvia has been active in promoting the protection of human rights on the national and international level. Latvia closely cooperates with **UN** **Special Procedures mandate holders** and encourages other UN Member States to do so, in particular by issuing them standing invitations. Latvia is a party to the major international and regional human rights treaties. The possible ratification of other international human rights instruments is constantly on our agenda for consideration. Latvia is a party to the European Convention on Human Rights; the European Court of Human Rights ensures that Latvia observes the engagements undertaken to comply with the rights and fundamental freedoms enshrined in this Convention.

At the national level, the **Constitutional Court of Latvia** verifies the compliance of legislative acts and other legal acts both with the Constitution and with different international human rights instruments binding upon Latvia. The Constitutional Court of Latvia thus continues to bring to the attention of the executive and legislative branches the changes that are required to protect and to ensure the human rights of individuals.

I would also like to emphasise the significant role played by the National Human Rights Institution – the Latvian **Ombudsman Office**. Now more than ever, the Ombudsman Office plays an important role in promoting the protection of human rights, and the lawful, efficient exercise of the State power, in accordance with the principles of good governance, as well as in accordance with the Latvian Constitution and international treaties binding upon Latvia. The importance that Latvia attributes to the Ombudsman Office is demonstrated by the growing State budgetary resources allocated each year to the Office. Comparing the 2017 budget of the Ombudsman Office to the budget of 2020, it has increased by more than 30 per cent.

Madam President,

We acknowledge that it is a continuous task to ensure that human rights are fully respected and implemented. World pandemic has shown that human rights, democratic values and rule of law are the cornerstones for security, diversity, integrity and development of all societies. Despite the progress achieved, Latvia like any other country, still faces challenges ahead.

To overcome these challenges, we must not forget the achievements and good practices that have allowed us to move forward. To start with, I would like to underline Latvia’s efforts and progress in promoting **gender equality**. According to the World Bank’s latest *Women, Business and the Law* 2021 report, Latvia is among 10 countries in the world that fully guarantee legal equality between women and men in employment and business. I am proud to acknowledge that Latvian women have proved their professional excellence in the highest posts in the international and regional organizations. Seeing women in leading positions and politics is now a norm rather than an exception. Women have been or currently are represented in all three highest ranking posts of the State – the State president, the Speaker of Latvian Parliament, and the Prime-Minister.

It is crucial that voices of women and girls are heard and integrated in the decision‑making process. We pay particular attention to the empowerment of women and their engagement in public and professional life, along with our efforts to eradicate any form of violence against women and girls. We are committed to work towards this goal internationally, as Latvia has become a member of the **UN** **Commission on the Status of Women** for the next five years. Latvia aims to take an active role in shaping and enforcing global standards and policies for gender equality, as well as shifting gender-based stereotypes.

Latvia remains strong in its support for the **Women, Peace and Security** agenda and recognizes the close link between global security and equal participation of women. In 2020, the Latvian Government adopted its first National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security for the term of 2020-2025. Our Plan envisages raising public awareness on gender equality issues and on the need to fight gender-based violence. The Plan also envisages training of the stakeholders in the defence and home affairs sector, and foresees transfer of Latvia’s experience and knowledge to our partners.

Madam President,

One of Latvia’s main challenges in promotion of gender equality is the **gender pay gap**. We acknowledge that the main reasons behind the gap are societal assumptions, gender stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes. Latvia is committed to shift these stereotypes and raise awareness on gender equality through the Gender Equality Action Plan for 2021-2023.

In the past 5 years Latvia has intensified its efforts to prevent and eliminate **violence against women** and domestic violence by improving the legal framework and implementing additional preventative mechanisms. We have introduced several amendments to the Criminal Law. For example, the amendments expand the list of aggravating circumstances. The amendments establish criminal liability for harassment, genital mutilation and emotional abuse, as well as update and expand the legal provisions on severe, medium and minor bodily harm. Additionally, now the proceedings against perpretrators of such crimes can be initiated as soon as information about a possible criminal offense is available to law enforcement authorities. Thus, victim’s application is no longer a precondition for instituting the proceedings.

Having signed the **Istanbul Convention** in May 2016, Latvia has committed to align its national legal framework and practices with the provisions of the Convention. While the process of ratification is still pending, it is noteworthy to mention that in August 2020, the Constitutional Court of Latvia has initiated the case on the compliance of several norms of the Istanbul Convention with the Latvian Constitution. The case is under the examination now, and we expect the Constitutional Court’s assessment in the nearest future.

As it has been pointed out in the questions sent in advance, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the risk of gender-based violence. Acknowledging the possible risks and the seriousness of the situation that conditions of prolonged isolation may bring along during COVID-19 pandemic, the Latvian authorities have paid particular attention to addressing the gender-based violence. Using different media and information channels, the public has been informed about the opportunities to receive social rehabilitation services. We have strengthened the skills of professionals working in this field, allowing to identify risks of domestic violence and support the victims.

At the end of March this year, the Parliament adopted a law authorising the courts to impose an obligation on a person to attend training programmes aimed at reducing violent behaviour. In January 2021, the Parliament set up an inter-institutional working group to address the domestic violence and violence against women. The working group has taken practical measures to protect the rights of victims of violence and provide them support services. Let me assure you that our goal to reach zero-tolerance against all kinds of gender-based violence remains a key priority.

In Latvia’s efforts to prevent and eliminate violence, particular attention has been devoted to eliminate **violence against children**. The national Development Plan of 2021-2027, and the operational strategy of the Ministry of the Interior for 2020-2023 particularly aim at reduction and prevention of violence against minors, including mobbing in schools. In addition, the protection of children’s rights and reduction of the risks of violence are advanced through education. Children and young people are educated on forms of violence and potential risks. The staff of educational institutions are trained to recognize and act in case of violence.

Madam President,

Since the examination of the previous report, Latvia has continued to advance the human rights of all persons.

In the light of the questions sent in advance by Belgium and Germany, let me elaborate on the recent developments regarding the promotion of the rights of **LGBTI persons**. In 2020 and 2021, the Constitutional Court delivered two very important judgments in this field. In 2020 the Constitutional Court found that the provision of the Labour Law granting vacation days to the father after child’s birth did not sufficiently protect the right to respect for family life of **same-sex couples**. Considering that the provision was applicable only to the father of the child, the Constitutional Court concluded that the same rights must be given to the partner of the mother. The Constitutional Court ordered the Parliament to elaborate necessary legal framework allowing same-sex couples to enjoy their right to family life.

The second judgement of the Constitutional Court – delivered a month ago – concerns the provision of the domestic law that determines the amount of the State fee payable by the partner of the estate-leaver for registering the ownership rights. Currently, the amount of the State fee to be paid by a spouse is significantly lower than the one to be paid by other heirs. Yet the Latvian legislation does not envisage same-sex marriage or relationship. The Constitutional Court concluded that the contested norm did not ensure legal protection of families consisting of same-sex partners, and was therefore discriminatory. The Government has to address the identified insufficiencies by summer 2022.

Madam President,

Latvia has achieved significant progress in ensuring participation of **civil society**. In Latvia, consultations with civil society are mandatory when drafting legal acts, policies or other documents affecting the interests of society. Latvia has increasingly promoted public participation and cooperation. We ensure democratic governance and public’s involvement in important matters, the decision-making process, and provision of high‑quality services that correspond to the interests of public. One of the indicators demonstrating more active civil society participation is the number of non‑governmental organizations that has increased by 10 per cent since 2016. The number of employees working in non-governmental organizations has grown by 58 per cent.

Latvia actively continues to promote integration of persons belonging to **ethnic minorities** in Latvia. Latvia is a multicultural country, with people from more than 150 ethnic groups residing here. The recent surveys show that the persons belonging to ethnic minorities feel more confident about the possibilities to develop their language and culture in Latvia. At the same time, the Latvian language skills of persons belonging to ethnic minorities have improved.

Since 2017, the education system in Latvia has undergone modernisation. The use of the State language has been gradually increased in several stages throughout the education process. At the same time, Latvia continues to finance ethnic minority education programmes in seven languages.

Latvia encourages the civil participation of persons belonging to ethnic minorities, as well as the preservation and development of their cultural identity. Measures promoting successful social integration and civil participation of persons belonging to ethnic minorities take place regularly. Latvia continues to support the strengthening of identity of ethnic minorities and preservation of the uniqueness of their culture by allocating state funding and organizing various events.

Additional attention is paid to combatting exclusion and discrimination of **Roma people**. Since 2019, Latvia has been implementing Roma integration policy measures in accordance with the National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy Plan for 2019-2020. One of the main goals of this Plan is to strengthen the cooperation between the Roma community and the Government institutions, and to encourage civil participation of the Roma people. Latvia has introduced different projects, encouraging cooperation and dialogue among the representatives of the Roma civil society, the national and municipal governments, as well as social partners. The aim is to promote more effective participation and better coordination of the Roma integration policy. Latvia has also introduced measures to reduce the marginalisation of Roma people in education and to promote their inclusion in the education process.

Madam President,

As just mentioned, Latvia has consistently worked towards more inclusive society. Let me continue by assuring that Latvia recognizes the importance of addressing crimes motivated by hate. Various government institutions have implemented practical measures to help identify and combat **hate crimes**. Advancement of support services to groups of individuals exposed to risks of social exclusion and discrimination started in 2018, and continued in 2019, covering 1450 people. Social integration policy includes implementation of several measures to combat prejudice against people with different ethnic background and appearance, and to increase the public tolerance. The State Police in cooperation with the State Police College and the Security Police has developed guidelines for the identification and investigation of hate crimes. Training programs for employees of various institutions cover topics on identification, prevention and investigation of hate crime. In 2019, more than 600 managers and specialists of municipal agencies, associations, foundations and businesses gained knowledge and understanding of the importance of tolerance and diversity management. The record-high number of participants taking part in Baltic Pride parade in Latvia in June 2018 shows that the participants feel secure from hate and demonstrates the effectiveness of practical measures. Let me assure you that Latvia will continue to combat all kind of hate and raise public understanding towards groups at risk of discrimination.

In response to the advanced questions posed by Belgium and Canada regarding **human trafficking**, it is important to mention that a new Action Plan against Trafficking in Human Beings for Latvia 2021-2023 has been drafted with its adoption pending. This plan has been drafted in accordance with 4 “P” model – Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, and Partnership. The plan foresees 33 actions to address trafficking in human beings. I would like to mention some of them: Prevention activities include raising the awareness of society, municipalities and professionals of justice system. Protection activities include establishment of the National Coordination Mechanisms by the end of 2023 in order to improve timely support, such as rehabilitation for the victims. Prosecution activities will cover further development of legislative framework to improve identification and prosecution, strengthening of cross-border cooperation, as well as reinforcing the fight against money laundering related to human trafficking. In Partnership activities, we envisage focusing on better coordination with various private and public actors. Further, in September 2021 Latvia will launch an international project that aims at enhancing the identification and investigation of human trafficking for sexual and labour exploitation. It also envisages to increase co‑operation between law enforcement authorities and other key actors to combat human trafficking.

I would like to emphasise that already now the Latvian Government ensures that every human trafficking victim receives State funded social rehabilitation services, even if the number of identified victims exceeds the pre-planned budget for this purpose. The police informs the victims about the respective non-governmental organizations and the services they provide.

The State authorities supervising labour safety also play an important role in disclosing victims of human trafficking. Out of 10 000 inspections carried out annually, 25 percent are targeted at revealing undeclared and illegal employment. In the future, the competent authorities will focus their activities on thematic inspections in particular in industries with higher risks of undeclared work. Latvia will continue to intensify its efforts given the fact that it gradually becomes a receiving country. To prevent illegal employment and human trafficking, unemployed are offered different active labour market programmes and social services to support their return to the labour market. This includes different training programmes, wage subsidies, as well as programmes for treatment of addictions.

Latvia strives for a safe environment that safeguards human rights of every individual. Latvia has taken a number of measures to improve opportunities including access to education and involvement in policies for **persons with disabilities**. Policy measures are targeted both to improve accessibility and increase the number of digital services, public buildings and outdoor areas available to persons with disabilities. In November 2019, the Government approved the Regulations establishing the requirements for general schools to be able to admit students with special needs. Accordingly, the number of students with special needs who study in general public schools has increased from 440 in 2016 to 4 530 in 2020.

Madam President,

Latvia has consistently worked towards supporting the **naturalization** of non-citizens. I wish to recall that the status of a non-citizen was established in 1995 for humanitarian reasons in order to regularize the status of those persons who had arrived in Latvia during the illegal Soviet occupation and who were not citizens of Latvia. In October 2019, the Parliament adopted the Law on the Discontinuation of Non-Citizen Status for Children. Consequently, as of 1 January 2020, all new-born children in Latvia are automatically granted Latvian citizenship, unless the child’s parents opt for the citizenship of another country for their child or unless the child is a citizen of another country. This law completely ends the assignment of the status of non-citizen to new-born children. Moreover, Latvia has created all the preconditions for non-citizens to acquire Latvian citizenship by facilitating the naturalisation procedure, as well as by implementing information campaigns. The results show that the measures taken have been successful. The number of non-citizens has dropped from 29 per cent in 1995 to 10 per cent in 2021.

Latvia also provides protection to **asylum-seekers.** The new Asylum Law that entered into force in January 2016, ensures the basic needs of asylum-seekers on par with Latvian citizens. Latvia also ensures that the conditions of the accommodation centre meet international standards and that refugees, persons with alternative-status, asylum seekers and their minor children receive State-funded healthcare similarly to Latvia’s permanent residents. Various projects have been conducted to promote integration of people in need of international protection and to combat existing prejudices. Special attention has been paid to activities aimed at learning Latvian and promotion of employment.

Madam President,

Unfortunately, the **COVID-19** pandemic has had an impact on all spheres of life, including effective enjoyment of human rights. In addition to already mentioned measures, Latvia has introduced various social protection means to address the impact of pandemic on human rights. To name some, Latvia has provided allowance for idle employees, extended unemployment benefits, covered sick leave payments related to COVID-19 and introduced various benefits paid for parents with children. With these mechanisms Latvia is striving to maintain the highest human rights standards.

Madam President,

Distinguished delegates,

I would like to conclude by expressing Latvia’s unwavering commitment to strengthen human rights protection in our country. Thank you, and we look forward to your questions.