

**Address by Mr. Jānis Šmits, Chairman of the Human Rights and  
Public Affairs Committee of the Latvian Saeima,  
at the Conference of Chairpersons of Human Rights Committees  
of the Parliaments of the European Union  
15 June 2007 in Berlin**

Honourable Mrs. Daubler-Gmelin,  
Honourable ladies and gentlemen,

I thank you for the opportunity to be among you today in order to discuss the human rights policy of the EU member states and the possibility of developing a uniform human rights strategy in Europe. The current conference is of great significance, and I hope that by its end we will come to valuable conclusions which will enable parliamentary human rights committees to improve their cooperation in attaining common objectives

The Republic of Latvia is a democratic parliamentary country with a population of about 2.3 million people in which the legislative power is vested in a unicameral parliament, the Saeima.

After regaining its independence, Latvia has experienced crucial changes in order to join the European family of nations not only *de iure* but also *de facto*. During the period from 4 May 1990 to 1 May 2000, we drastically reformed our legal system by abolishing the old Soviet-type legal system and creating a new one in conformity with European legal norms. One of the first laws of the renewed Republic of Latvia adopted on 10 December 1991 was the Constitutional Law on the Rights and Obligations of an Individual and a Citizen.

I would not say that our path was easy; nevertheless, I must acknowledge that we are gratified by the fact that during the past fifteen years we have

managed to accomplish that which for other countries would have required 50 or even 100 years.

With regard to the implementation of human rights policy, it should be stressed that Latvia was one of the first of the former Soviet-bloc countries which in 1995 established the National Human Rights Office whose functions are analogous to those of an ombudsman's institution in EU countries. Thus, Latvia was one of the first countries which implemented the recommendations of the World Conference on Human Rights, held in Vienna in 1993, by adopting a national plan for the protection and promotion of human rights and establishing an independent human rights institution. In 1993, the Constitution of Latvia was supplemented by Chapter II on fundamental human rights. In the Republic of Latvia, fundamental human rights are recognized and protected in accordance with this amended Constitution and other international human rights instruments binding upon Latvia.

Moreover, I would like to note that, according to the statistical data, Latvia is one of the most diligent countries as regards transposing EU directives in its national legislation.

The Committee, I chair was established in July 1993, and since its foundation, the Committee has addressed a wide range of issues related to social integration, the protection of children's rights, gender equality, public affairs (radio, television, the press), places of imprisonment, asylum seekers and refugees, as well as language issues, matters concerning religious organisations, persons repressed during the Soviet regime and national and ethnic minorities. We have been closely cooperating with the former National Human Rights Office, now the Ombudsman's Office, relevant ministries and different religious and non-governmental organisations.

Taking into consideration the diversity of our society, the Secretariat of the Minister for Special Assignments for Society Integration Affairs has been established with the task to harmonise our society.

What were the most topical issues concerning the human rights in Latvia in 2006? I have collected the relevant information from several sources, such as the research carried by the Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, data provided by the Ombudsman's Office, as well as letters received by the Saeima Human Rights Committee.

According to the research carried out by the Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, the most topical problems in the sphere of human rights are the following: **the right to education, social security and employment.** Then come the rights of the disabled, the right to inviolability of private life, housing, a health-friendly environment, property, as well as patients' rights.

These are the rights about whose protection the inhabitants of Latvia are concerned the most and consider them as problematic.

A similar picture is revealed by the submissions and complaints received by the Ombudsman's Office: **the right to housing, social security and employment,** followed by the right to humane treatment and respect for human dignity, the right to a fair and timely trial, as well as the right to property, etc.

If we compare the information about human rights problems in Latvia provided by these two independent sources, we see that the range of issues worrying people is practically identical. If we look at the submissions received by our Committee, priorities can be classified as follows: **the rights of imprisoned persons and the disabled, issues related to free expression of religious beliefs and the right to a fair and timely trial.**

Among the laws adopted in the area of the Committee's competence particularly significant are the Ombudsman Law, Pornography Restriction Law, as well as special laws on the six traditional denominations in Latvia. At the moment there is an ongoing discussion between society and the government regarding the draft of the Mass Media Law.

Although our Committee has legislative power, and thus it has the right to draft and review submitted draft laws, it is open to public proposals for amendments to existing legislation if necessary.

Society is increasingly concerned about issues related to protection of children against sexual harassment. Several grave crimes resulting in the death of a child have been committed recently, and society proposes establishing a registry of paedophiles and introducing more severe punishment for perpetrators.

Human trafficking is also among the topical issues; therefore, the Cabinet of Ministers has adopted the National Programme for the Prevention of Human Trafficking for the period from 2004 to 2008, which provides for adoption of laws, measures for raising public awareness, as well as support (rehabilitation) opportunities for victims of human trafficking.

To sum up, I would like note that there is still a lot of work to be done with regard to educating people on their rights. According to recent data provided by the Eurobarometer, more than 60% of Latvia's inhabitants do not know their rights when they encounter discrimination. There are still several groups of people which are not informed about their rights and do not know whom to consult when their rights are violated. Furthermore,

we must admit that when people talk about rights, they too often forget about the other component of human rights, namely, obligations – obligations to God, family, country, etc. This correlation is revealed in the preamble of the Basic Law of Germany, which starts with the words “Conscious of their responsibility before God and Men”, as well as in Article 1, which reads as follows: „The dignity of man inviolable. To respect and protect it is the duty of all state authority.”

I think that in the coming years, we will have much work to do in this regard – to raise people’s awareness, to educate them and bring about a harmonious balance between person’s rights and responsibilities. In this process, not only the parliament and the government but also NGOs and religions organisations should be involved. If we look back to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can remember that in the USSR people had only obligations and no rights. However, now, living in a free and democratic society, we focus on people’s rights and are starting to forget about their obligations.

This introductory conference is the first step towards mutual cooperation ,and I hope it will lead to joint activities which will yield fruit in the future. Only through cooperation and learning from another’s experience will we be able to cope with the task of ensuring equal rights to all inhabitants of our country. Latvia does have a positive experience which can be shared with others. We know that with mutual respect, a multid denominational and multiethnic society such as the one in Latvia can live without conflicts.

In conclusion, I would like to note that Latvia and Germany have been linked by historical ties. Latvia is grateful to Germany for Lutheran pastor Ernst Glück, who was the first to translate the Bible into Latvian, because

this translation served as the basis for shaping the literary Latvian language. The same applies to the German system of law, which was taken as the basis in founding independent Latvia in 1918. These positive examples from the past give us hope that our future cooperation will be successful and blessed.

Thank you for your attention.