

Address by Mr. Gundars DAUDZE,
Vice – Speaker of the SAEIMA (Parliament of LATVIA),
Head of the Latvian National Group,
at the General Debate of the Interparliamentary Assembly
Lusaka, March, 2016

Mr. President,

Secretary General,

Dear Colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be at the Inter-Parliamentary Union General Assembly once again. I would like to thank the organizers for the wonderful job they have done in organizing this event.

I perceive the IPU as an excellent platform for parliamentary diplomacy. First and foremost because it is an ideal platform for discussions on issues of common interest.

Reflecting on the current challenges we face, it is more important than ever to develop sustainable democracies and strong parliaments.

In order to fight terrorism we need to counter political extremism. We need to maintain our cultural heritage for the next generations.

We have to admit – our youth represents the group that is more likely to succumb to extreme political views and also likely to express these views through violence, especially if there are no other tools at their disposal. As described in the concept note, people, especially the young generation, are often disappointed in their experience with democracy in practice.

Thus our discussion on “giving voice to youth” is very timely. Given this opportunity, I would like to share our experience with democracy enhancing initiatives.

In October Two-Thousand and Twelve (2012) Latvia's Parliament started the initiative for schools "Get to know the Parliament". It is an educative programme, which gives the opportunity for students to understand the work of the parliament and to learn how legislation affects them and how they can influence the work of the Parliament.

Since the launch of the programme three (3) years ago almost thirteen percent (13%) of all schools in Latvia have participated in the programme at least once. Many have made the programme a part of their curriculum.

Six (6) years ago we launched the initiative "Youth Parliament". We give the opportunity for youngsters aged fifteen to twenty (15-20) to submit their ideas. Afterwards they have a month to collect votes for their ideas and the authors of the top one hundred (100) ideas get elected to the "Youth Parliament". Submission of ideas takes place online. For collection of votes they are encouraged to campaign at schools, use social media and other methods. Making submission of ideas online and allowing to collect votes online offers a high level of accessibility. The newest round of elections will end next weekⁱ.

The elected youngsters will meet in the parliament on April twenty-ninth (29th) and debate amongst each other their ideas under the auspices of the Speaker of the parliament. Through their work, which closely resembles the work of the parliament, they will develop four (4) declarations, which in the last session will be adopted.

These declarations in the form of recommendations are then submitted to parliamentarians, who can bring these ideas to the agenda of the parliament. In our experience the declarations usually are highly relevant and up-to-date with current political debatesⁱⁱ.

We have happily noticed, that as a result of participating in the "Youth Parliament" the participants continue debates amongst each other, have an active dialogue with parliamentarians, and sometimes decide to join youth organizations of political parties.

The last example I would like to share is the regulation for collective petitions. In the rules of procedure of parliament we have foreseen that ten thousand (10'000) people have the right to submit a collective petition or legislative proposal to the Parliament. We are obliged to include the

petition on the parliament's agenda. After some debate we decided that the right to submit a petition should be given for anyone from the age of sixteen (16), despite the fact that the right to vote is gained at eighteen (18). We also decided that the signatures for petitions can be collected online. This tool has proven itself in our society as a modern, widely-accessible link between public opinion and the work of parliamentarians.

Distinguished colleagues,

in conclusion, let me stress that inclusiveness is key. It is important to educate people on how democracies work and on what tools they have at their disposal to influence their own future.

A society that has access to those deciding their fate on a continued basis and through a variety of tools is less likely to grow frustrated or disappointed.

I wish a fruitful further discussions to all of us.

Thank you!

In 1992, under the auspices of the National Guard (*Zemessardze*) a youth organisation - Youth Guard (*Jaunsardze*) was created. Over the years, it emerged as the largest youth movement in Latvia, bringing together more than 7,000 boys and girls between the ages of 12 and 18 years.

As the parliament debated increased insecurity and the need to increase our military spending, it is the declaration from the "Youth Parliament" that reminded us that we need to think about improving the current armed forces and about mentoring and tutoring our future armed forces. As a result the increased military spending covers short, medium and long-term necessities.