



## Ombudsman of the Republic of Latvia

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Rīga

### **People Make the Language Great**

Information for media and the public

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The State of Latvia, proclaimed on 18 November 1918, has been established to guarantee the existence and development of the Latvian nation, its language and culture and to ensure freedom and promote welfare of the people of Latvia and each individual.

More than a quarter of a century has passed since the beginnings of the Third Awakening and events of May 1990. In Latvia, we celebrate May not only because of the Day of the Restoration of Independence of the Republic of Latvia but also due to the Latvian Language Day celebrated on 13 May.

Preamble of our Constitution, the Satversme, reveals that Latvian language attests the identity of Latvia and it is a foundation of a cohesive society. We must understand that no language and no culture is a threat in a multinational society. Mutual respect and symbiosis of the State and cultures is possible.

Twelve years ago, on 26 May, our parliament the Saeima ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. It proves that Latvia has been and will be a land where various national and ethnic groups reside and that the Republic of Latvia has not stood and will not stand in the way of national minorities to maintain their culture by using their mother tongue in the family, community (unofficial and internal communication), and religious organisations. It is also verified by Article 114 of the Satversme, which states that “persons belonging to ethnic minorities have the right to preserve and develop their language and their ethnic and cultural identity”.

I want to remind and stress that national minorities do not represent only those groups in our State with culture, religion or language different from Latvian. National minorities are groups who have been living in Latvia for generations by following their traditions; they regard themselves as a part of the State and society of Latvia and have confirmed that with belonging to the citizenship of Latvia.

Both the European Court of Human Rights and the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Latvia have recognised that the State of Latvia may regulate the use of the official language, in compliance with fundamental human rights. The Constitutional Court has stated that the necessity to protect the official language and to strengthen its use is closely related to the

democratic regime of the State: "... in the context of globalisation, Latvia is the only place in the world where the existence and development of the Latvian language and, by the same token, the Latvian nation, can be guaranteed, a restriction or limitation on the use of [this] language ... on the national territory constitutes a threat to the democratic regime of the State"<sup>1</sup>. To protect. To protect the official language aiming not to forbid somebody from doing something but to guarantee the fundamental values of the State that have been fixed in the Satversme.

I wish the solidarity that strengthened us during the late 1980s and early 1990s revived, as it allowed a nation formed by a totality of multi-ethnic people make a step towards restoration of a state based on democratic values.

I wish it to be heard that there is no other place in the world where maintaining the cultural and historical heritage of the Latvian nation has been set as a national goal, where the Latvian language, a value significant for the State, has been guaranteed with such possibility of protection, preservation and development as it is in the Republic of Latvia.

I wish that we all who live in Latvia understood — we have reached much as a State, but we must admit that we could have done and can do more. But it can only be done together, without sorting ours and others and by looking for those things that unite us instead of parting us. I believe that one of the most important things capable of uniting is our Latvian language, which serves as a means for not only communication but also understanding amongst all residents of Latvia irrespective of their nationality, mother tongue and religion.

Why are we proud of speaking English? Why are we proud of speaking German or French? And why are we not proud of speaking Latvian? Why not to be proud of speaking a language spoken by few millions only? Why do we not use the opportunity to be a part of something so special, rare and protectable? It is our Latvian language — small, but ancient and cared for, strong and sonorous. And people are the ones that make a language great. People who think in it, speak it and listen to it. I am truly honoured to be amongst those few millions thinking in, speaking and listening to the Latvian language, and I am glad to understand and be understood by others.

Ombudsman of the Republic of Latvia

Juris Jansons

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<sup>1</sup> Constitutional Court judgement from 21 December 2001, case No. 2001-04-0103, conclusion part Section 3, Subsection 2