

ICBL Testimony to the Latvian Parliament (Saeima)

Geneva, 16 April 2025

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony today. I am Director of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), a global network of civil society organizations working towards the elimination of landmines. The ICBL played a key role in the negotiation and adoption of the Antipersonnel Mine Ban Convention in 1997 and were co-laureate of the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize. We are speaking to you today because we are extremely concerned by Latvia's potential withdrawal from the Mine Ban Convention, and we urge you to vote against the draft law to leave this life-saving convention. Our viewpoint stems first and foremost from a concern for the safety of the Latvian people, which we know is also your primary interest in considering this draft law. In addition, the ICBL is deeply worried about the impact Latvia's vote to leave would have on the convention and all global norms to protect civilians in conflict.

Before going further, I want to be perfectly clear that the ICBL and its global membership stand firmly with the people of Latvia and your neighbors at a time of great regional insecurity. We absolutely understand the fear of your people today and the right to defend yourself against any potential external threat. But let me be equally clear – using antipersonnel landmines **will not** make the people of Latvia safer. **Weapons that predominantly kill and injure civilians cannot safeguard any nation's security.**

On the contrary, use of AP mines will place in grave danger the lives of Latvian women, children, and other innocent people, not just during a conflict, but for years and years into the future.

As a reminder, landmines are inherently indiscriminate weapons, meaning **they cannot be aimed at an enemy soldier** and are incapable of distinguishing between a military target or a civilian. They are hidden in the ground, waiting as long as it takes for the first person to come along, whether it be a soldier or a child, whether it be during a conflict or decades later. Indeed, 25 years of research has shown that 85% of AP mine victims are civilians, and 40% are children. This is a fact. If you use mines on your soil, your people will pay a terrible price. Children are at greatest risk as their small and vulnerable bodies, closer to the ground, bear the full force of explosions. Using mines to defend one's territory is therefore a reckless gamble with civilian lives. The fear alone of stepping on mines will prevent people from

walking in fields and forests, from playing in playgrounds, from wandering off any paved surfaces because you never know where a mine could lie. Is that the future you want for your country? For your children?

I would also like to address the idea that AP mine use will deter Russian aggression and be of decisive value in any eventual battles. While the case of Ukraine has been cited, we have not seen any hard evidence to this effect. Indeed, military experts from NATO countries and elsewhere have determined that **any marginal usefulness antipersonnel landmines may have in the battlefield is far outweighed by the appalling humanitarian consequences they *will definitely have* for civilians.**

Your goal is to deter Russia and win battles should they occur. But to have any impact, minefields need constant maintenance and surveillance and will do nothing to stop enemy soldiers with modern minefield breaching equipment. Russia, in possession of such equipment, will therefore be able to cross mined areas **in a matter of hours with relative ease**. And while Russia's neighbors speak of establishing border minefields, they are particularly challenging to monitor and maintain and will not prevent Russian forces from crossing without continuous observation and direct fire.

In addition, one needs to consider the particular characteristics of this enemy. Studies of past conflicts show AP mines will do little to deter or slow an army's advance **when an enemy is fiercely determined and willing to accept substantial levels of casualties**. These forces will simply be ordered to cross the minefields, with commanders accepting the risks this entails. Knowing the Russian army's high acceptance of casualties among its soldiers, this is a particularly important consideration. Experience also shows AP mines can become **as much of a liability as an asset**, limiting tactical flexibility and causing "friendly fire" incidents as frontlines shift and soldiers need to move through areas they or their fellow soldiers previously mined.

Your own National Armed Forces (NBS) came to similar conclusions just one year ago, when it announced that it did not recommend leaving the Mine Ban Convention. NBS Commander Lt. General Kalnins argued that "there are now far more efficient, powerful, and modern weapon systems than landmines to deter infantry and heavily armed units." Defense Minister Spruds agreed, noting Latvia has "other effective anti-mobility tools in place," including command-activated anti-personnel mines and anti-tank mines, both permitted by the convention. He noted that the presence of NATO military units in Latvia and an agreement to establish a

Baltic Defense Line will also strengthen Latvian deterrence and defense capabilities, and that allies – which don't want their troops involved in laying mines or threatened by their use - encouraged Latvia to stay in the convention.

Given these observations, we wonder why Latvia would now want to invest scarce resources in such obsolete technology instead of more effective and modern weapons? It is worth noting that mines are not the cheap weapon they are made out to be. In addition to the cost of acquiring, laying and maintaining minefields, it is extremely costly and time-consuming to clear mined areas after conflicts. Moreover, any use will inevitably create victims, who will need lifelong physical rehabilitation plus psychological support, as well as help for economic reintegration.

Leaving the Mine Ban Convention would also be a devastating step backwards in global efforts to protect civilians from indiscriminate and inhumane weapons. States long ago decided that for the sake of humanity, there must be limits placed on the means and methods of warfare. What would be the point of norms governing behavior in conflict if they were only applied in peacetime? If we reject well established norms when times are tough, what's next? Biological or chemical weapons? The Geneva Conventions? And what message does this send to other countries that fear for their security from internal or external threats? This is a dangerous slippery slope we do not want to head down.

The Mine Ban Treaty has been hugely successful over the past 25 years, saving countless lives by fostering the destruction of stockpiles, clearance of huge areas of mine-contaminated areas, support for victims, and a sharp reduction in use of these horrid weapons. Our members, including landmine survivors from around the world, have spent decades working to end the use of mines and fix damage caused to communities from past use. They are now shocked and horrified that European countries are about to undermine such progress and make the same mistake that dozens of other countries now regret.

In closing, we thank you sincerely for this opportunity to provide our viewpoint, and we encourage you to learn more before taking such a major decision. We ask you to take the time to reflect on safer and more strategic responses to the understandable fear of your populations to the Russian threat. Your leadership and responsible decisions will save Latvian lives.

Thank you.