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Address of the President of Latvia at the International Conference EXPANDING BORDERS: COMMUNITIES AND IDENTITIES, Riga, University of Latvia

(Transcript)

Mr. Chairman,

Distinguished rector,

Distinguished guests and participants of this conference,

Welcome on behalf of the Republic and its President to this gathering. Great minds have decided to address the questions that seem to me at the moment of particular actuality.

It's been only 18 months since Latvia has joined the European Union and is now functioning as a full partner among the other nine new members and the 15 older ones, who, of course, did not join all at one and the same time. We had so-called mushrooming growth of the Union, starting with the very first core of the Coal and Steel Agreement between France and Germany, long bitter enemies, who had fought out on a battlefield the contentious issues of both their physical borders and the borders of their influence within the continent of Europe. They were joined right from the start by four other countries and this original core has then kept expanding to the current 25 and as far as we can tell there are others waiting at the door to be admitted.

A number of questions that Europe is facing now is how far can this process go, how far can we continue to expand and have we really developed an entity within the Union that is sufficiently homogenous first of all to know how it can function in an efficient manner and that is also sufficiently homogeneous to give the feeling to each and every one of its inhabitants - no matter under which flag, under which national identity - can it give them all a sense of belonging to this common family of European nations, do they have at all sense of being European and if so, what does it mean to be European.

And I think, to understand what the questions are all about right now when we are in the process of reflection that has been forced upon us by the resounding no that the populations of France and the Netherlands have pronounced to the Constitutional Treaty, this theory of reflection that is now upon us has not only involved the heads of government or state, it has not only involved the bureaucrats in Brussels, but it should involve scholars, scientists, but most of all, the population at large.

We hear a lot these days about what Europe is about and what model it should follow. And I as President of that new member state get a lot of questions about where Latvian stands in terms of the model of Europe and what it envisages or would like to develop. And the questions are often put in a rather simplistically dichotomous way and they ask whether we are in favour of the social model of Europe or of the so called Liberal economy model.

And just as we when we were asked whether we would rather join the European Union or NATO in the early years, I have to give the same answer, that this is not the choice that we would like to make, no more than a child at divorce is happy at being asked where they love mummy or daddy better and with whom they would like to live; it is even worse than that it

is rather than being asked whether you would have better right or left arm being cut off. Can you live without it? We cannot.

For a country like Latvia with the history it has we need the security of NATO and we need the potential of growth that the European Union offers to all of its members. And similarly to this false choice between different models. I sincerely rather think it is matter of a multiple choice, test, where one can check off either A or B. It is one variant must be allowed to choose both and indeed to try and integrate the best aspects of the two models.

We have joined the EU with the idea of doing away with the borders that used to separate countries that fought for territory and that fought for influence. In the case of Latvia we have joined it to do away with remembrance of the sort of thinking that set the tone for the beginning of the Second World War when countries with sufficient military strength would make treaties among themselves and split up the rest of us as we were goods and chattels that belonged to them or toys that children divide among themselves when they are at play. We do not wish to either toys or goods and chattels in anybody elses hands. Like all human beings the people in Latvia want to be sovereign masters of their fate within their country that is the sovereign master of its fate as a nation. We have had it now for 15 years. Our sovereignty, our independence and our capacity to grow.

We have now for 18 months been part of the Union where the internal borders between the countries have been brought down, as low as you can bring them in terms of barriers between them. But the question that you are addressing here at this conference is: has this truly given us what we had hoped, what our ancestors have hoped? Have it given us what those who were out on the streets at the French revolution had hoped, the peasants during the uprisings at Kauguri and elsewhere in the early 19th century? Have you obtained what our people had hoped for when they went here in the Old Riga on the barricades or gathered under flags on the borders of the River Daugava? Are people any happier than they were?

And that is an interesting question, because I think we can measure quite objectively the progress that has been achieved in this country on a wide variety of priorities. We have recovered our independence. We have our flag, our symbols, our institutions. We participate as full members internationally where decisions are taken. Our prosperity in macroeconomic terms has been growing in a spectacular manner. We have at the moment the very best indicators of growth. The question is, have all these objective and macroeconomic indicators, have they filtered down to the life of the everyday citizen? If so, how far? And what is their reception and the perception in a daily life of a person, who gets up in the morning and faces the day and at the end of the day goes to bed and maybe while they are brushing their teeth and looking in a mirror, can they say: Have I had a good day? Am I satisfied with what I am doing in life? And I do not have anything that I would like to be looking forward to tomorrow or the day after?

I am happy to see that sociologists have decided to single out the next year as the year of the study of the quality of life and I am particular gratified to see that the Strategic Analysis Commission of Latvia has in a sense anticipated this event by addressing the question this year already and by devoting to it a number of serious scholarly and scientific studies. I look forward to seeing the results of these studies being made available to as wide a public as possible, various levels of society here in Latvia, the young and the old, the urbanised and people living in the country. I hope that other countries, both those of so-called Old Europe and those who still are outside the expanded Union but who are attracted by it like a beacon in terms of its achievements in precisely offering its inhabitants what seems to be after all a better quality of life. Have these countries as well looked to it to analyse these aspects and to see how they in turn can go about improving the life of the citizens in their country.

As somebody trained not in sociology but psychology, I just like to touch upon two of a few basic ideas that psychologists have addressed in this context in advance.

It was an unheard of event in Canada, in the province of Ontario, to found an Institute for Child Studies and Dr. Blatz, whom I still had the chance to see as professor in my youth, was its founder and he developed a most interesting theory about child psychology. And in essence it is very simple.

According to Dr. Blatz a child, growing up, as the first need, has the need for security. In other words, of course, the child needs to be tended, to be kept clean, to be kept fed, to have the opportunity to sleep and But it needs security and the security comes from attachment to a person who is always there, a person whom they can trust. Usually it is the mother, it can be extended to others in certain cases, but there is a need: the ability for child to grow, depends on the security that is derived from the attachment to care giver who is always around. At the same time, as the child grows up, they increasingly need the opportunity to explore. They need the opportunity to face challenges; they need the opportunity to affirm themselves, to acquire skills, to acquire competence and the satisfaction that comes from it. And if by an excessive preoccupation with security the mother or the care giver does not allow the child to stand on its own feet, to button its own buttons, to go out and explore, to fall and to get hurt and to climb trees, even though it is dangerous, then that person will not achieve the maximum of their potential.

If you do not have this security to retreat to when you fall or when you hurt, it is harmful to development. But if you are not allowed to explore, and possibly to hurt, then that too is not very good for development. And I think that when we talk about this antagonism between the model of free enterprise in Europe and the model of social security, too often we are thinking in Marxist terms, in terms of the struggle between the classes, these very outmoded 19th century divisions and that really, I think, should be by now rather put behind us. Because here again is dichotomy that in a modern Europe really does not apply.

We do wish to have societies where people have security and the sense of absolute security nets and where basic necessities of life are available to all. And the basic necessities of life, of course, are not what they used to be when the tribes of North America just a little over 150 years ago. They are the modern priorities of the modern age. They need quality of lodgings and services and essential healthcare, care in the old age, access to education and all things that we do consider as the elementary requirements of life, but which, by the way, in so many parts of the world, even today each and every one of them would be considered as excessive luxuries that human beings would not hope to achieve.

So this is the basis from which we start. We set the standard very high as to what is and what must be the basics of a good and acceptable life in a society. But the question then is: what happens at the other end? How far must we climb and what must be done? And by increasing as it were the basket of basic necessities available to each citizen, are we truly improving the quality of their life? Are we adding to their happiness? Are we getting value for our money? Is each additional billion of billions that we are spending on certain social programmes actually paying off in terms of the results in the good it brings to society and even more importantly: is there being results to each individual in their heart and in their mind? And many of them probably know the studies done some years ago by a Hungarian scholar now living in North America - and particularly his famous studies about the sense of happiness and what makes people happy. And those of you who are familiar with his work will recall that he had some very surprising results.

Far from finding a direct correlation between the level of income of a person and their satisfaction in life, it was almost a negative correlation in the sense that some of the happiest people that he was able to find were, for instance, goat-tenders on Sicily or farmers in Alpine regions, where by all objective standards, measurements and parameters you would have said that these people are having a terrible life, that they bear terrible burdens and that they have every right to be deeply unhappy. But quite the contrary, these were the very happiest people of all. They were radiant, even though wrinkled, they were happy,

even though bent from the labour that they carried out each day and they expressed a deep sense of satisfaction with who they were and what they were doing. And I think that this is a very important lesson to learn. Because what seemed to be the key to their satisfaction is that they were living in an environment where they felt in control, they felt in power in everything that they did, they felt confident in all the skills that they had learned since childhood and every single day of their life, and every step on their way they were able to see the results of their labours and they were able to derive satisfaction from it. And the old woman going every morning to milk her goats by hand in the cold of the Alpine morning in winters, could be sitting there on her little bench and see the milk dropping in the pail and every drop that was running gave her satisfaction.

That is precisely the sense of happiness and satisfaction that we find in the Latvian heritage of the Latvian dainas, this vast body of folk-songs that at various times I have had the occasion to explore and to admire. And there too you see reflected lives of physically very heavy labour, of great dangers surrounding and uncertainties in terms of international political situations, but the direct sense of a feedback of the results of ones own efforts, the ability to build up, say when you wave cloth to see it grow row by row. When you are gathering flax, even as you are engaging in a back-bending gathering, you already visualise the fine linen cloth that would grow the long way up to the base, you will be able to reap. And that is the same sense of satisfaction that I think the modern studies have also revealed.

If around 16% of our population whose desire is to have more time to grow flowers in their life, I think what they are telling you is that they would like to be like the Little Prince. They would like to be able to grow some rose somewhere that is all their own that they can care for, that they maybe temperamental and maybe not be blooming as well like the ones that you see at expositions or in the wonderful colourful pictures in gardeners catalogues. But what one has a deep need for is a rose that is all their own, temperamental as she may be. Because you need something and someone to love and to care for and to think at least, to think that what you are doing is making a difference in the world to someone somewhere, even if it is a rose somewhere on a far-away planet.

We all need our rose to care for and I think that Europe and every inhabitant of Europe has to be able to find that sense of satisfaction. Because we can increase the funding and we can increase the programmes and we can increase the political support but unless we are able to get people that feeling of empowerment, that feeling of making a difference, at the same time and sense of security that comes from somebody loving them and accepting them, and where there are no barriers to what they are not to do because these barriers should not be there because of refusal, of putting somebody beyond the pay-off.

Ultimately it is extraordinary simple and at the same time it is extraordinary difficult to achieve. But unless we understand what is the essence of what people need, it is futile to go about inventing ever new programmes, spending ever more money, because we would be going around in circles and the social models that we intellectually have constructed and that we are so attached to and so proud of, what risks to happen is that they would go in flames all around us and we see that we are back to square 1 and better rethink what we had been thinking of all along.

Ladies and gentlemen,

You are here gathered, you are thinkers. And I wish you all to continue in your efforts. We need thinkers in our Europe and in our continent. We need thinkers in Latvia to guide us and to participate in that common effort, which we after all is a civil society.

Thank you for being here and my best wishes to you all!