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Address by H.E. Dr. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, President of the Republic of Latvia, at the Opening of the 3rd Joint Meeting of the Baltic Assembly and the Nordic Council, (English translation), 31 May 2001, Riga

Dear guests of Riga,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to extend a warm welcome to the representatives of the Baltic Assembly and the Nordic Council who have arrived in Riga a city whose 800-year cultural and historical experience belongs not only to the people of Latvia, but also to all nations of the Baltic Sea region and Europe. I am very pleased that Latvia is hosting this joint forum on the role of our region in the Europe of the 21st-century. And I cordially invite you and your colleagues to attend the 800th anniversary celebrations of our beautiful metropolis this August, when the ancient city of Riga will become a European Culture Capital.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This is an anniversary year not only for Rigans but also for the people of all three Baltic countries. Ten years ago, our nations regained their freedom and independence during the so-called Singing Revolution. This was a turning point not only in the history of our people, but also in the history of Europe as a whole. We are deeply grateful to our Nordic neighbours for their firm support during that decisive period.

Your understanding and unwavering position strengthened our mutual friendship and solidarity. It also helped the international community to better understand the Baltic peoples peaceful struggle to regain their rightful place in the community of European nations. The people of the three Baltic nations still remember the first visits to our republics by the parliamentarians of the Nordic countries during our most recent National Awakening.

Owing to your perseverance, the Baltic States Information Centre was opened in Copenhagen at the end of 1990. And in the spring of 1991 the Nordic Council of Ministers established information offices in all three Baltic States. The presence of these offices was a significant link to the outside world for our captive nations. It strengthened our conviction and belief that the totalitarian regime could be overcome, and helped us to break free from the stifling influence of the pervasive Soviet propaganda.

After we regained our independence, the Nordic countries became our closest partners in numerous crucial areas, including investment, trade and transport. Of particular value was the experience shared by our Nordic neighbours in the creation of democratic institutions. I particularly want to highlight our contacts with various NGOs in the Nordic countries, as well as our close co-operation with the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers. The structure of these two organisations later served as a basis for creating the Baltic Assembly and the Baltic Council of Ministers.

We can be gratified that during the past few years, the partnership between the Baltic States and the Nordic countries has spread in new fields and directions. We have now established a close-knit community of eight countries, each of which provides its unique contribution not only to this region, but also to Europe as a whole. As our partnership grows

closer, the Baltic and Nordic countries should pinpoint their common interests and positions with respect to the difficult challenges facing Europe and the entire world. The key issues on the agenda of today's meeting – the enlargement of the European Union, regional co-operation and the EU's Northern Dimension – accurately reflect the principal directions of co-operation between the eight Baltic and Nordic countries. The Nordic countries' political and practical support of the Baltic States' integration into the European Union has been invaluable. The Baltic States are pinning high hopes with regard to the success of the current Swedish presidency of the EU, and to the Danish presidency, which will begin in the second half of 2002.

In my opinion, the level of parliamentary co-operation between the Baltic and Nordic countries is closer than ever, and is helping to promote the European integration process. At the same time, I see great potential for increased co-operation among related political parties. I am convinced that this meeting in Riga will serve to facilitate such efforts.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Europe is undergoing monumental changes, and all of the countries of the Baltic Sea region are deeply involved in these historic transformations. Today as never before, European integration is affecting our region. The EU accession negotiations for Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania and Poland have reached a crucial stage. The geographical space covered by the Schengen treaty has widened to include Northern Europe, and in the very near future we shall all be holding the euro in our hands, either as our own or as our neighbouring countries' currency.

The historical process of reuniting and strengthening the links of our region with the rest of Europe is increasingly making us aware that the success of European integration will depend upon several things. It will depend on the courage and farsightedness of the leaders and politicians of Europe's nations, it will depend on the transparency and democracy of the new European institutions, and it will depend on the strength and stability of public support.

The European Union has managed to achieve a positive balance between large and small countries, between different regions and provinces that have attained various degrees of development. We must make a joint effort to preserve and strengthen this unique asset of the European Union. We must also be prepared to address questions concerning our identities, and we must assess whether and how the decisions made by the European Union might pose a threat to our national identities and cultures. This issue is of particular importance to those who have regained their statehood and their place in Europe relatively recently.

While being aware that Europe, just like ancient Riga, will never be completed, I think that it is important to identify issues of common interest and to reach agreement on the fundamental principles and institutions of the new Europe. The European Union's member states, together with the candidate countries, should discuss these issues in detail and adopt a common declaration on the political future of Europe.

It is important for Latvia to participate in these important debates by involving key decision-makers, members of national parliaments and local governments, non-governmental organisations, and the general public, in an extensive and open discussion on European values, and on the development of the New Europe. This will help everyone to make informed decisions in evaluating and identifying all the pros and cons, and in deciding on priorities in order to better face the challenges of the 21st century.

One of Europe's greatest assets, including that of our Baltic region, is its diversity of cultural and historical experiences and languages, and in particular, the ability of its inhabitants to understand other cultures. A knowledge of several languages is the earmark of many a modern European. Latvia believes that this is essential. This month Latvia ended its Presidency of the Council of Europe, where the role of Europe's smaller nations and

cultures in the formation of a new, united continent was emphasized.

The close level of co-operation between the Baltic and Nordic countries is based on our common cultural and historical heritage, on similar views regarding the development of the region and global processes, and on unifying common goals. Today we have established a wide array of contacts at various levels between non-governmental organisations, scientists, professors, students, artists, local governments and parliamentarians.

The geographical, historical and cultural unity of the nations of the Baltic Sea region is strengthened by a creative mentality, a spirit of tolerance, a high regard for work and labour, and a unified world outlook that is rooted in our cultural values and traditions. A well-educated population, firm political commitment and wide public support will be essential if we are to successfully integrate the Baltic Sea region into a united Europe.

I am convinced that closer co-operation among the countries that border the Baltic Sea and increased political dialogue at all levels, along with a deep sense of commitment to the future of this continent, will strengthen the role of the Baltic Sea region in an enlarged Europe.

I wish you a fruitful exchange of opinions and much success in your future work. Good luck to you all!