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Address by Her Excellency, Dr. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, President of the Republic of Latvia, at the RUSI, 31 October 2000

Latvian Integration into Euro-Atlantic Structures: Why, When and How?

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I feel it an honour to be addressing the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies, which for the past 169 years has been at the forefront of analysis and debate on the whole spectrum of defence and security issues. I am particularly pleased that this distinguished institution is paying such close attention to the historic process of pan-European unification.

During a recent visit to Warsaw, British Prime Minister Tony Blair emphasised the special role played by the UK and the United States in ensuring stability and security in Europe. I fully agree with Prime Minister Blair, and would like to take this opportunity to thank the United Kingdom for the exemplary support it has provided to Latvia in security matters.

The UK was the first country in 1918 to recognize de facto the newly formed Government of Latvia. The active participation of British troops in Latvias struggle to consolidate its independence in 1919 was a tangible expression of British support. The gravesites of British soldiers laid to rest in Latvian soil still remind us of the sacrifices made by British troops in support of Latvias freedom.

Following the end of Latvias struggle for independence in 1920, Latvia still had to achieve de iure recognition of its statehood. Once again, British assistance was crucial. Prime Minister Lloyd George used his influence to achieve de iure recognition of the Republic of Latvia on January 26, 1921.

The Latvian people highly value the fact that the UK was among those Western countries that did not recognise the forcible incorporation of Latvia into the USSR in 1940. This tragic loss of our statehood was possible due to the lack of a credible international security arrangement at that time. For this reason, Latvia is determined to accede as quickly as possible to the NATO alliance and to the European Union.

My topic today concerns the security aspects of integrating Latvia into Euro-Atlantic structures. This integration will signal the ultimate removal of artificially imposed divisions, which for decades had threatened to bring Europe into yet another conflagration far more devastating than any experienced before, and which had been seriously impeding the integrated and harmonious development of the continent as a whole.

Today, we, as Europeans, can pride ourselves at having achieved overall peace and stability on the continent after centuries of strife and constant warfare. Our societies have established a broad consensus about the way our countries should be run, on the basis of free-market economic principles, democratic political institutions, the respect of human rights, and the rule of law.

These common values and interests offer a solid foundation for creating a new family of secure, stable and prosperous nations that will eventually encompass the entire European continent.

It was in pursuit of these fundamental goals of security, stability and prosperity that the NATO alliance and what is now the European Union were created about half a century ago. Today, these two organizations have become the most viable vehicles for attaining long-lasting peace and affluence among the nations of this continent.

Latvia shares this conviction along with eight other Central and Eastern European countries, which see the continued enlargement of the NATO Alliance as their top security policy goal. This shared conviction has created a spirit of solidarity and cooperation among the nine NATO candidate nations, which released a joint statement in Vilnius in May, stating that "the integration of each democracy [into NATO] will be a success for us all."

The candidate countries reiterated their commitment to NATO membership at a meeting of their defence ministers a few days ago in Sofia. A gathering of the foreign ministers of these nine nations in Riga next May will further advance the practical dimension of strengthening relations between the NATO candidate countries.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Central and Eastern European countries do not perceive NATO enlargement as a horse race, or as a zero-sum game. They realize that as they prepare for NATO and EU membership, it is in their national and regional interests to strengthen co-operation in all fields, and to avoid unnecessary rivalry. They realize that they will all be better off if they support each other, as they did during their noble, non-violent and successful joint struggle for freedom nearly a decade ago.

At the same time, it is the responsibility of each and every nation to ensure that it fulfils the criteria for membership in both of these bodies. Each country should be evaluated on its own merits, according to objective criteria for accession that have been clearly defined and that are the same for all. Latvia is certainly committed to an all-out effort that will ensure its continued progress towards accession at an accelerated rate.

In order to ensure that Latvia be properly prepared for full NATO membership, the Latvian government is committed to gradually increasing the countrys defence allocations to 2% of the GDP by the year 2003.

Latvia will continue implementing the practical measures needed to qualify for NATO membership, which centre around the implementation of the countrys Membership Action Plan (MAP). MAP is an important new element in Latvias individual preparations for future membership in NATO.

We are taking these procedures very seriously, and are pleased by the high evaluation of our progress and achievements in Brussels.

The historical process of pan-European integration, which began with the reunification of Germany, should culminate with the accession of the remaining candidate countries into NATO and the EU. Latvia, along with the eight other NATO candidate countries, is eagerly awaiting and intensively preparing for the NATO Summit in 2002.

However, we are concerned by the fact that currently, serious planning for the next step of NATO enlargement does not seem to be particularly high on the agenda of NATOs member countries. I therefore urge NATOs constituent members to fulfil the promise made at the Washington Summit to build a Europe free of ideological and military divisions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The accession of East Germany to NATO a decade ago, and of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic last year, has had a positive effect on security in the whole of Europe, as well as on bilateral relations between the countries in the region.

NATOs remaining candidate countries have been pleased to observe that the contributions of the newest members of the Alliance have served to enhance European stability and have added significantly to NATOs military strength and political cohesion.

The eventual admission of Latvia and its Baltic neighbours to NATO will similarly be to the advantage of the whole Euro-Atlantic community, first and foremost by enlarging the space of European security and stability.

In all logic, Russia too will benefit from the presence of stable, peaceful and predictable neighbours at its Western borders, just as it has gained from bordering Norway over the last decades. Stability and predictability open new opportunities for trans-border co-operation, the fight against organised crime, the transparency of regulations and legal norms, and increased business and trade. Our neighbours to the East will only gain from the expansion of the area of peace and stability, and from the eradication of obsolete, Cold War era stereotypes, outdated fears, prejudices and suspicions.

As a neighbouring country of Russia, Latvia is interested in the evolution of Russia as a democratic state with a functioning market economy, a state open to dialogue with the West. Latvia can serve as a valuable partner in this dialogue, and is ready to participate in it at any moment.

I am pleased to note that support for NATO membership is stable and increasing among the Latvian population itself. A full 60% of Latvias citizens believe that Latvia should join the NATO alliance, and support is also growing among those who do not speak Latvian as their mother tongue. Despite the massive anti-NATO propaganda to which it is exposed through Russian-language media, nearly half of the countrys minority population believes that Latvia should become a full member of NATO.

During my visit to Latvian peacekeepers in Bosnia last year, I was very pleased to meet a young Latvian officer of Russian origin who was as committed as all his colleagues to protecting our common values and to ensuring a durable peace in the Balkans. The policies of the Latvian government encourage the full participation of all ethnic, religious and national groups in all aspects of life. We are proud of the fact that our policy of social integration is working successfully, and that it can serve as a model in other regions of the world.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The establishment of long-term stability, security, and prosperity in Europe cannot take place without the full participation of the continents Central and Eastern democracies, which have invested a great deal of their efforts to forge closer ties with their Western neighbours.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Latvians struggled against a repressive regime to regain their independence and reinstate a democratic form of government.

We have succeeded.

The next step is to continue in the same direction, which logically leads to euro-atlantic integration.

Sometimes I hear people saying that we have to adopt this or that measure so as to conform to EU or NATO requirements. In reality, we have to adopt the measures we are taking for our own sakes, because we want to live in a prosperous and safe country. For Latvia, the best way to ensure this is by joining NATO and the EU.

We wish to avoid the repetition of our twentieth-century history, when we bore the tragic consequences of being pawned off to the sphere of influence of one belligerent superpower or another. Accession to NATO for Latvians means much more than joining an integrated military command, or participating in peacekeeping operations. For us, accession means becoming active partners in the historic process of building a Europe free of artificial barriers and unfounded divisions.

The recent crisis in Kosovo has shown that NATO still remains the only organization in Europe with the will and the capacity to ensure security in extreme crises. I am confident that NATO will remain a pillar of the transatlantic security architecture in the 21st

century.

Latvia has already shown that it is ready to assume its share of responsibility for ensuring long-term security on this continent. My country is contributing actively to European peacekeeping operations. We have deployed military, police and medical officers to Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and have taken part in the OSCE observers' mission in Georgia.

On a more local scale, we have taken part in minesweeping operations in the Baltic Sea, and are building a regional airspace surveillance system that will be linked to NATO's own air surveillance network. We have collaborated with the Alliance in the development of science and environmental programs. During the last couple of years, a joint project involving Latvian, American and Canadian scientists on the cleanup of polluted waters at the former Soviet submarine base in Liepāja has resulted in a wealth of knowledge and experience for all parties concerned regarding the reservicing of former military bases.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The common goal of acceding to NATO and the EU has also led to some very close and successful endeavours of defence co-operation between the three Baltic countries. For several years, Latvian, Estonian and Lithuanian soldiers from the joint BALTBAT peacekeeping unit have been operating in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Our three countries have also established a common air defence monitoring system and a Baltic Defence College.

The assistance provided by the donor countries to these Baltic projects has been of the utmost importance, and our common projects will play a significant role in integrating the Baltic military structures into NATO's security system. The military co-operation of the three Baltic countries will also provide a good basis for their eventual contribution to NATO's military capacity.

Moreover, we intend to study carefully the European Union's Force Catalogue, which is about to be released and which will contain valuable information for the associated countries on how the manner in which they can best contribute to the implementation of the Headline Goal.

Latvia is currently working on the creation of a Latvian Light Infantry Company - LATBAT. This Rapid Reaction Force is scheduled to be ready for service by the year 2003, which coincides with the date for the Headline Goal. I am pleased to note that this company will be available to participate in the European Union's defence and security undertakings. Latvia is involved in expert consultations about European defence, and stands ready to contribute to the creation of Headline Goal forces.

Driven by a desire to become an active player in the Euro-Atlantic community, Latvia is vigorously pursuing accession to both NATO and the European Union. Relations between Latvia and the European Union entered a new phase in December 1999, with the beginning of accession negotiations. Latvia hopes to conclude these negotiations by the end of the year 2002, and to be among the first candidate countries to join the European Union.

As a future member of the European Union, Latvia supports the ongoing debate on a Common EU foreign and security policy. We welcome the conclusions of the EU Summits in Cologne and Feira regarding the EU's external relations with Russia, the Middle East and the Mediterranean region. In our view, however, a more coherent and consistent stance would be welcome in the practical implementation of these political guidelines.

Any common EU foreign and security policy must be backed by military capabilities. While European defence is an important priority for the Union, any joint European military forces must also be tightly integrated with NATO.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Europe faces an ongoing integration process. The continent has embarked upon serious and ambitious reforms, which are designed to make this integration possible. We

value highly the role and contribution of transatlantic links, and welcome the United States policy of forward engagement to Europe and the Baltic Sea Rim.

Our ultimate goal is the creation of a Europe whole and free in an alliance that includes the European democracies, the United States and Canada as a foundation for stability and security in the 21st century. Within this framework, we look forward to being active and cooperative members of the world community of nations.