



## Latvijas Republikas Valsts prezidenta kanceleja Prezidenta preses dienests

Pils laukums 3, Rīga-50, LV-1900, tālr. 7092122, fakss 7320404,  
prese@president.lv, www.president.lv

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### **Address by Her Excellency, Dr. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, President of the Republic of Latvia, at the 5th Stockholm Conference on Baltic Sea Region Security and Cooperation, 19 October 2000**

#### **Security Aspects of Integrating Latvia into Euro-Atlantic Structures**

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I feel it an honour to be addressing the Stockholm annual Conference on Baltic Sea Region Security and Cooperation, which has proven its special role in promoting discussions on the evolution of the Baltic Sea region. I particularly appreciate the contribution this conference has made to strengthening the active engagement of the United States in the region, and in consolidating transatlantic links.

My topic today concerns the security aspects of integrating Latvia into Euro-Atlantic structures, and of strengthening cooperation among the countries of the Baltic Sea region. Despite their geographical proximity, the countries that border the Baltic Sea coast are quite varied in their level of economic development, geopolitical commitments, defence capabilities and security alliances.

Some Baltic Sea countries, such as Germany and Denmark, are prosperous members of both the European Union and the NATO alliance. Other well-off Baltic Sea nations, such as Sweden and Finland, have chosen to join the EU but not NATO.

Neighbouring Norway, while not precisely a Baltic Sea country, has done the contrary, by joining NATO but opting against EU accession. Poland has become a full NATO member but is still an EU candidate country.

Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania are not yet members of either organization but hope to join both the EU and NATO as rapidly as possible. And Russia, which is experiencing the greatest economic difficulties of the countries I have mentioned, wishes to join neither the EU nor NATO.

At the moment, the Baltic Sea region is made up of a checkerboard of nations at different stages of development. I believe that ultimately, we must work together to fashion a more integrated region all around the Baltic seaboard, a region comprised of nations closely comparable in status, all of them closely compatible in their mode of governance and tempo of development.

This does not mean that all of the Baltic Sea countries must be forced into the same mould, or fitted to some sort of Procrustean bed. They need not be necessarily all members of the same organizations. Thus, from the point of view of security and defence, Sweden and Finland's neutrality has served these countries well, for they have been able to build credible defence systems of their own. Latvia, in its current geopolitical position, cannot afford the luxury of being a neutral state.

That is why Latvia has set accession to both NATO and the European Union as its top foreign and security policy priorities. For Latvia, and for other former captive nations as well, these aspirations are complementary and inseparable.

The full accession of all the candidate countries to NATO and to the EU will finally represent the end of a centuries-old era of power politics and spheres of influence.

It 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 and North American 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 NATO's member countries. I therefore urge NATO's 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.

NATO's 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 NATO's 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 Latvia's 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 country's 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 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 continent's Central and Eastern democracies, which have invested a great deal of their efforts to forge closer ties with their Western neighbours. Sometimes these efforts have come at a great social cost, but we see this as an investment in our common future.

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

During the past decade, we have worked hard to rebuild our nation on the ruins of the collapsed Soviet empire and to integrate the various sectors of our society. We have been making economic sacrifices and taking occasionally unpopular decisions in order to join institutions that uphold such overriding values as individual liberty, collective security, free market practices and the rule of law.

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, and am particularly grateful for our American and European partners consistent support of NATO enlargement into the Baltic region.

Latvia has already shown that it is ready to assume 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 Liepja 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 United States and other 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.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Because of its desire to become part of the Euro-Atlantic community, Latvia is actively and 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.

Latvia will have completed its position papers on all 31 chapters of negotiation when Sweden assumes the Presidency of the EU at the beginning of next year. We look forward to Sweden's support in beginning negotiations on all the remaining points of discussion, so as to complete them by our target date of January 1, 2003.

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.

Latvia is involved in expert consultations about European defence, and stands ready to contribute to the creation of "Headline Goal" forces. While European defence is an important priority for the Union, we feel that 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 regional community of nations surrounding the Baltic Sea.

Thank you.