



Latvijas Republikas Valsts prezidenta kanceleja Prezidenta preses dienests

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Address by Dr. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, President of the Republic of Latvia, at the luncheon hosted by Mr. Jens Stoltenberg, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Norway, in Bergen, 21st September 2000

Your Majesties,
Mr. Prime Minister,
Mr. Mayor,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen!

I am very grateful for the opportunity to visit Norway, and particularly the city of Bergen, which has a long tradition of historic ties with our capital Riga. Beginning in the 13th century, both Riga and Bergen became important port cities and trading centres of the Hanseatic League. It is no accident, therefore, if some of the glimpses of the past that you find in the exhibition *Riga in the Mirror of Time* at the Hordaland International Art Gallery will seem familiar to you. They bear witness to the many common elements in our cultural past.

I am especially honoured to address you within the halls of the great *Hakonshallen* fortress, one of the finest testimonies of the Norwegian peoples cultural and historical heritage. Over the centuries, this great fortress has experienced the full brunt of war and devastation. But like a phoenix which rises again from the ashes of destruction, the *Hakonshallen* has been rebuilt to its former splendour and glory a living symbol of the Norwegian peoples tenacity and unbreakable spirit in the face of severe adversity.

There is an edifice in the heart of Latvias capital city which has shared a fate similar to the *Hakonshallen*. Built in the 14th century, the Blackheads House in Old Riga was bombed heavily during the Second World War and razed to the ground during the Soviet occupation. It was rebuilt brick by brick after Latvia regained its independence, and opened to the public less than a year ago. This is one example of the manner in which Latvians are rebuilding their country, step by step, ever since recovering their statehood ten years ago.

I take this opportunity to pay special tribute to the people of Norway for their steadfast support of Latvias strivings for independence. I should like to recall in particular an important visit by a group of Norwegian parliamentarians to Riga exactly ten years ago, in September of 1990. This visit offered sympathy and encouragement to our nation during a time of need, and was a clear signal of Norways support for our independence struggle.

Norway has continued to support Latvia in its efforts to rebuild a prosperous and stable country, as well as in its foreign policy aspirations. Latvia has set its course, and is determined to become a full member state of both the European Union and the NATO alliance. Latvia is committed to reaching the required levels of preparedness for NATO membership by the time of the next NATO summit, and is looking forward to a decision that will include the Baltic countries in the next round of NATO enlargement.

The successful process of Latvias gradual integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions has laid a good foundation for the dynamic development of economic co-operation between our two countries. Norway is already among the top 10 investing countries in Latvia. But

attractive opportunities are still available for increasing the volume of trade and investments between our countries. The presence of business delegations during the visit of Your Majesty to Latvia, and during my current visit to Norway, attests to the importance we attach to economic co-operation, an item high in our order of priorities.

Our bilateral co-operation is already extensive and encompasses a broad spectrum of activities. I would like to mention just some of the most successful joint projects in which Norwegian assistance has accelerated the reform processes in Latvia the Vidzeme School of Higher Education in Valmiera, the Rural Development Studies and Research Centre in Jelgava, and the Nord-Balt prison project. Norways assistance in the implementation of Latvias State Language Training Programme has also been of great value in advancing this fundamentally important facet of our social integration policies.

Latvia and Norway have many common goals and interests, guided as we are by the overriding desire to ensure long-term security, stability and prosperity throughout the European continent. It is this commonality of beliefs, principles and values that offers a solid basis for the close co-operation between Latvia and Norway, between the Baltic countries and the Nordic countries.

Latvians feel a great affinity with the people of Norway, who also have lived under the rule of foreign powers, and who displayed great strength and courage in resisting a brutal occupation during the Second World War. We admire the energy and resilience that your people displayed after the War as you rebuilt your country from the ground up. We look to your enduring accomplishments as a positive example, at a time when we too are rebuilding our own nation.

I should like to raise this glass to your health, to the people of Norway, and to ever expanding co-operation and friendship between our two countries.