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Address by Dr. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, President of the Republic of Latvia, to the participants of the 6th Baltic Conference on Intellectual Cooperation in Riga, September 17, 1999

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished Academicians,
Your Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to stand here before you at this historical moment, when the tradition of intellectual collaboration between the three Baltic States and indeed of the whole Baltic region is being renewed after an extremely sad, lengthy and tragic interruption of so many decades.

While this is not the only forum in which such exchanges can and do take place, it is a symbolically important one. It is important precisely because of this interruption, where the years of the sixth conference and that of the present seventh one, put side by side, remind us of the fate that the three Baltic nations have suffered during the second half of this passing century.

I accepted to talk to this distinguished audience in an earlier incarnation of mine, when having retired as a professional scholar I had taken on duties as an administrator as the head of the Latvian Institute. Now, by the time this conference has come upon us, I stand before you in yet another guise, that of Latvia's current head of state.

I must say that the amount of attention my potential pronouncements have attracted has been in direct, inverse proportion to the scholarly thoroughness with which I have been able to prepare them. In those days when I would spend considerable lengths of time delving into a topic and researching it seriously as a scholar, I never received quite the attention that I can attract now, with less time at my disposal as head of state to prepare public presentations.

But such a turn of events also has its positive aspects, in the sense that I can use the attention brought on by my new position to express support for a variety of endeavours, this being a major one among them. I wish to stress that my being here among you is an expression of my deepest support for the idea of Baltic cooperation, particularly in the intellectual sphere.

As Academician Stradi so kindly pointed out, I have spent a considerable portion of my life working in the interests of Baltic cooperation in the scholarly sphere. The Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies has done a great deal to foster an interest among Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as countries that have not only their geographical location, their geographical contiguity and the experience of the last half century in common. They also share a common set of values, attitudes and goals about where they are heading. These values and goals are remarkably coherent and well founded. They fit in rather beautifully with where the rest of Europe is and wants to be going during the next century.

I think one cannot overemphasize the importance of common values as a precondition to understanding, communication and peace. In the short months since I've been President of Latvia, I've had the occasion to visit Bosnia-Herzegovina. I have seen what the city of Sarajevo looks like and I have witnessed with my own eyes (and it is a very sad and striking sight) the lengths to which lack of understanding and lack of common values can drive populations which previously had been cohabiting peacefully in a narrow geographical space, much as our nations do here on the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea.

Too often we forget just how close and how similar our values and our aims are. We forget how much we have to gain from cooperating with each other in the intellectual sphere. During recent visits to Estonia and to Lithuania, I was very happy to find that my colleagues, Presidents Meri and Adamkus, as well as other officials that I met; that the scholars I knew from my earlier contacts and the ones I met recently -- all of them expressed a readiness to enter into a new phase of collaboration and intensified cooperation in the spheres of science, culture and the arts.

These important elements, I believe, have been relegated to the background. They have been superseded by political and economic developments during the decade which has elapsed since that unique and wonderful and unrepeatable event of the Baltic Way. It's perfectly natural for each nation to have tackled the concrete practical problems of everyday life, to have put an emphasis on intellectual development as being but a part of a larger picture, where economic stability was the prime concern and of prime importance.

After all, all three countries have had to make a rapid change and switchover from centralized, controlled economies and state government funding to free market economies and international competitiveness. This change has been extraordinarily rapid and amazingly thorough. But it has tended to preoccupy people's thoughts. And to some extent it has led to a threat to the faith that we hold in intellectual values and their importance in society.

I hope that this conference will be an opportunity to reassert to the general public the fundamental importance of intellectual values as a pillar of modern and democratic societies. Why? Because we do not live by bread alone, and we do not live by macroeconomic indicators alone.

Democracy stands and falls on the understanding that people have about the essence of a state and about their role in it. To be able to function in a democracy, people require literacy (and in the future they will require computer literacy, not just literacy as we know it now). They require an understanding of intellectual potential and intellectual development as something that is not a luxury that we can think about only once we feel comfortable enough or rich enough for it.

The shoe is, in fact, on the other foot. The driving motors of economic development are largely based upon intellectual resources; investment in education, training, development, and research; as well as the transition from basic knowledge to applied technology. These factors will become increasingly important during the next century.

We are no longer in the era when riches could be measured in the area of lands held by feudal lords. As we well know, the more people a nation employs in agricultural production, the greater its difficulties in competing in international markets.

We are not governed so much as before by the capacity of a nation to produce physical, tangible goods (although this of course will still remain an important part of any economy). Increasingly during the next century, information and knowledge will be the basis of economic development. They will be the basis of a nation's riches and of the standard of living to which the average citizen can aspire.

Therefore I must reiterate. Education, intellectual values and research are not idle luxuries. They are not things that we shall acquire perhaps later because we have more serious matters to think about now. No, it's quite the contrary. We cannot hope to get

anywhere without these important tools. They are necessities of life in a nation that takes itself seriously. They are indispensable to any country that wants to take its rightful place among the community of nations, as Latvia certainly hopes and plans to do in the not too distant future.

Similarly for our neighbouring countries, Estonia and Lithuania I believe a serious examination would show that they are exactly in the same position. I have singled out the three Baltic nations because they have had so much in common during their recent past. These three countries must emphasize the need for this trilateral collaboration as a separate facet of their larger integration into hierarchically higher structures, including those encompassing all the nations surrounding the Baltic Sea basin, which is a very interesting concept in itself.

The Baltic Sea basin is a very important level of our integration into the wider world. We are also obviously aiming for the rest of Europe and we wish to maintain close contacts with all of the countries composing it. But the three sister nations on the east coast of the Baltic Sea, I believe, have their own special needs and special interests.

They have, for instance, common requirements for the objective interpretation of their history, both recent and more remote. History is one of the topics in which ideology, point of view and prejudice can and do influence the way it is depicted and presented. And if I were to single out any one single area in which collaboration between the three Baltic nations is absolutely primordial and crucial, then the objective study of our history, both recent and remote, would certainly be a priority, but in collaboration and in close cooperation between all three nations.

This is not to say that other areas of cooperation are not important. While cooperation is especially important in the humanities, it is also essential in the basic sciences, where serious research often requires serious resources. I personally believe that we should create regional centres of development, regional technology transfer parks, and regional biotechnology research centres, where scientists from the entire region would work side by side. Single national laboratories are more likely to suffer from a lack of funds. The pooling of funds and resources, however, might result in better research infrastructures.

These I leave with you as hopes and wishes for the future. Most of all, I wish this conference success, and I wish that all the ideas and recommendations resulting from your meeting here today will reach the widest possible audience. I hope they will find the widest possible resonance, both among the general population and among our countries' decision makers and politicians.

All my best to you.