



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

Address by H.E. Dr. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, President of the Republic of Latvia, at Baku State University October 4, 2005

Mr. President,
Mr. Rector,
Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased and honoured to be addressing you here at Baku State University. As a former professor who taught at the Universit de Montral for 33 years, I feel quite at home in an academic environment, and I must say that I have felt quite at home during my entire visit to your beautiful country, where I have been received with extraordinary warmth and hospitality. This is the first ever official state visit by a Latvian president to Azerbaijan, and I hope that in the years ahead the relations between our two countries will grow ever closer.

The people of Azerbaijan have a great deal to be proud of. The city of Baku is without a doubt one of the most beautiful urban centres in the Caspian Sea region, where the ancient coexists harmoniously with the modern. One cannot help but admire the deep cultural roots and the ingrained sense of history that is evident throughout this stately capital. One hundred years ago, Baku flourished as the worlds largest producer of petroleum, and was a city of inspiration for one of Latvias most prolific writers, Ernests Birznieks-Upts, who lived in Azerbaijan until the beginning of the First World War. Today, Baku is once again experiencing dynamic growth and development.

Mr. President,

There are many parallels in the histories of our two nations. Both Latvia and Azerbaijan have endured centuries of foreign occupation, but both have survived and succeeded in re-establishing independent states and democratic societies. In 1918, both Latvia and Azerbaijan declared their independence from a Russian empire that had been weakened by war and internal conflict. Sadly, this first period of statehood in the 20th century did not last long for either of our countries. Russia reoccupied Baku in 1920, two years after Azerbaijan's declaration of independence, and imposed a harsh period of repression that was to last for another 70 years. Latvia was able to maintain its statehood for an additional two decades, before being overrun by Red Army troops in June of 1940, on the same day that Hitler's invading army triumphantly marched into Paris.

For the following five decades, the people of Latvia and of Azerbaijan suffered greatly under the totalitarian rule of the Soviet regime. But we were united in our will to survive and to once again become masters of our own destiny. The advent of glasnost and perestroika emboldened our nations to openly call for their independence, but was also accompanied by the tragic loss of human lives. On January 19 and 20, 1990, Soviet troops extinguished the lives of 137 Azerbaijanis in the streets of Baku. Exactly one year later, on January 20, 1991, Soviet military forces shot and killed several people in the centre of Riga, including two documentary film cameramen who were filming the events.

Fortunately, the USSR at that time was disintegrating from within, and we can rejoice at the fact that Azerbaijan and Latvia succeeded in re-establishing their independence in

1991. Since then our countries have undergone the difficult task of reforming their economies to attain a higher level of prosperity.

Mr. President,

We now find ourselves at a remarkable historical juncture. Rarely in the history of Europe has the fate of small nations depended to such a large extent on their own, individual choices and on their own performance; on the choice of their allies and the choice of their path of development. Ten years ago, Latvia made the decision to seek membership in the European Union and the NATO alliance. It took us nearly a decade, but last year we succeeded in realizing this goal.

We succeeded in transforming our country from a captive, communist state that was ruled by a totalitarian, foreign empire into a pluralistic, parliamentary democracy that is governed by the rule of law, and where fundamental freedoms and human rights are respected. We succeeded in implementing the transformation from a stagnating, state-planned, Soviet command economy to a flourishing and dynamic free-market system. That is why Latvia is now experiencing one of the fastest economic growth rates in the entire European Union. While these rapid and fundamental changes have not been without a social cost, and we are far from satisfied with the level of our average income, there is every indication that our standard of living will continue to improve gradually year by year.

Latvias bilateral relations with Azerbaijan are developing in a constructive and friendly atmosphere, and Latvia appreciates the reform process undertaken by Azerbaijan towards democratization and economic development. Latvia and the international community will be following Azerbaijan's upcoming parliamentary elections in November with great interest. We urge President Aliyev and the Azerbaijani authorities to do their utmost to ensure that these elections are truly free and fair.

My country is ready to share its experience of reforms and integration into international institutions with Azerbaijan, and I hope that in the years ahead we will see even more intensive political and economic co-operation between our nations. We are already cooperating successfully in the sphere of security and defence through Azerbaijan's Partnership for Peace program with NATO. Last month the Azerbaijani Minister of Defence was in Riga, where he held very fruitful talks with his Latvian counterpart.

I am also pleased to mention that last month the Azerbaijani Embassy in Latvia, which is headed by the distinguished politician Mr. Tofiq Zulfugarov, opened its doors in Riga. Latvia, for its part, is planning to open an embassy in Baku in 2006. These important developments are sure to bring forth closer co-operation between our countries.

Mr. President,

The economic dimension certainly has a large role to play in shaping the relations between the Caspian and Baltic Sea regions. I am pleased to note the great interest of Latvia's business community in this visit to Azerbaijan, as attested by the size of the business delegation accompanying me. In addition, the Latvian national airline company AirBaltic is considering starting direct flights between Riga and Baku, which would vastly improve connections between our nations.

Apart from purely economic considerations, there are also more fundamental ties that link our nations. These are our common values and convictions. The conviction that each and every individual is unique and a precious gift to humanity. The conviction that each and every nation, no matter how small or how big, has a linguistic and cultural uniqueness that must be treasured and nurtured. This uniqueness enriches our continent and forms a precious part of the common heritage of humanity.

Whether in the home, at work, or in educational institutions, we must cultivate positive emotions and attitudes such as empathy, compassion, tolerance and mutual respect, and forsake such negative emotions as hatred, prejudice and intolerance. Only then will we outgrow and extinguish the extremism and violence that looms as a constant threat

to the stability of our societies.

One central fundamental concern has remained unchanged throughout the ages: what can we human beings do, both individually and collectively, to make life better and more humane for all? Among so many others I would single out three concepts: plurality, inclusion and participation, which are essential for a truly functioning democracy, for creating new knowledge and for converting know-how into wealth. Many of you, students in this room, will one day assume important posts of leadership and responsibility. You, the future leaders of this country, have a great responsibility placed upon your shoulders. It is up to you, and to you alone, to build a country that you will be proud of.

I wish you with all my heart the wisdom and foresight to make the right choices in your lives. I wish to each and every one of you a happy and successful life that will make a meaningful contribution to the common welfare of your country and your people. May Azerbaijan bloom, flourish and thrive forever among the multihued garden of European nations.