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Address by H.E. Dr. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, President of Latvia, at the State dinner hosted by H.E. Mr. Ahmet Necdet Sezer, President of Turkey, Ankara, 19 April 2005

Honourable Mr. President,

Madame Sezer,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a genuine pleasure and a great honour for me to lead this Latvian State visit to your beautiful and friendly country, which has received us with such warmth and hospitality. I am especially pleased at this opportunity to meet with you again, Mr. President, and recall with satisfaction your successful visit to Latvia in the year 2002.

Latvia and Turkey represent two large regions of Europe, each with its unique historical background and rich cultural traditions. Latvia is a nation of the Baltic Sea region, while the waters of the Mediterranean and Black Seas bath Turkey's shores. Indirect contacts between our nations began as far back as the beginning of the Middle Ages, when trade routes linked the Baltic, Mediterranean and Black Sea regions. One can say that over the centuries it was the sea that acted as a gateway through which our ancestors established their first contacts and trade links.

Now, in this current day and age as well, our history and our geographical locations accord our countries a special place and significance in the world. Latvia can be seen as a bridge between Eastern and Western Europe, while Turkey has historically been a crossroads for people of varied cultural backgrounds. Turkey's culture belongs to the civilizations of the Mediterranean Sea basin, which have kept interacting over the course of centuries, thus stimulating, complementing and enriching each other. Today both Latvia and Turkey can use their rich cultural heritage to continue fostering a spirit of understanding and cooperation between countries and between nations in our contemporary, multicultural world.

Official cooperation at the State level between Latvia and Turkey began during the 1920s, when, following the great upheavals of the First World War, the people of Latvia and Turkey undertook the building of modern and democratic countries. Today, during my visit to the mausoleum of Kemal Atatürk, I could sense the great importance attached by the people of Turkey to the momentous changes that took place in this country during that time, as well as their profound impact on the evolution of Turkish society ever since.

The relations between Latvia and Turkey were tragically interrupted during the Second World War, when Latvia was occupied and forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union. Latvia remains grateful to Turkey for refusing to officially recognize this illegal occupation. I am pleased to note that since the reestablishment of Latvia's independence in 1991, the relations between our countries have been entirely friendly and cordial. Turkey and Latvia have assumed an active political dialogue, as evidenced by the frequency of State visits by our countries' presidents. During the past eight years, two Turkish presidents have been to Latvia on official state visits, and this is now the second State visit by a Latvian president to Turkey.

The last few years have been witness to momentous changes within our two countries. Two weeks ago, Latvia marked the first anniversary of its accession to the NATO alliance and in two weeks time, we will also celebrate the first anniversary of our accession to the European Union. Latvia greatly appreciates the unwavering and continuous support that Turkey provided during the period of Latvias accession to NATO. Latvia and Turkey are already cooperating closely in the sphere of defence and now, as full member states and partners in the NATO alliance, we will be able to deepen our cooperation in this field. As friends and allies, we will be able to work even closer together to ensure peace and stability in Europe and elsewhere in the world. Latvia and Turkey are bound by a spirit of mutual trust and by a readiness to assist each other in the defence of our common values and ideals. Both of our countries share a firm commitment to democracy, the rule of law and the respect for human rights.

Honourable Mr. President,

Just as Turkey strongly supported Latvias accession to the NATO alliance, so Latvia has supported and will continue to support Turkey on its path of accession to the European Union. Turkey has taken courageous and irreversible measures to facilitate its accession to this organization. As a result, in December of 2004, the European Council formally invited Turkey to begin accession negotiations later this year. Latvia is very pleased at this decision by the European Council and congratulates Turkey at this important accomplishment.

Our two countries share the conviction that the continued expansion of both NATO and the EU will permit us to look forward with confidence to a united and free Europe. That is because we view NATO and the EU not just as international organizations in the formal sense, but also as a powerful and effective driving force behind European and Transatlantic cooperation and unity. NATO ensures our security, while the EU focuses on economic progress and the building of truly civil societies. Both provide important tools for jointly dealing with such pressing global concerns as international terrorism and organized crime.

Our endeavours to promote and strengthen democracy in various parts of the world attest to our common understanding of overarching values. Turkey has long been a pillar of stability in its own region. Latvia has also been participating in peacekeeping operations in various regions, including the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq. I am pleased that Latvia and Turkey are unified in their support of those countries that have recently experienced significant changes and that have embarked on the road to democracy and to integration into European and Transatlantic structures. On the basis of Latvias recent experience, we know how vital such support can be, particularly in the initial stages of the reform process.

The issue of reform is also relevant in such well-established international organizations as the United Nations, which is celebrating its 60th anniversary this year. With such 21st-century global challenges as development, security and human rights for all, the UN Secretary General has called for the most far-reaching reforms of the United Nations in its history, and I express the hope that Turkey will offer its support for Mr. Annans initiatives.

Mr. President,

We can be pleased that the relations between Latvia and Turkey are growing closer at the bilateral level, and that they are based on a solid legal framework. We can take pride at the fact that today our two countries signed a cooperation agreement in the fields of education, science, culture and sports. The signing of this agreement will help to strengthen the level of cooperation between Latvia and Turkey in the field of culture, which Latvia views as extremely important. Cultural contacts serve to bring nations closer together and open the way to many other forms of cooperation.

Latvia is pleased at the opening of the Turkish information centre in Riga last fall. The result is that Latvian youths have been showing an active interest in the Turkish language and culture. I hope that the agreement signed today will promote an even wider

array of cultural and educational exchanges, including exchanges between Latvian and Turkish university students and professors.

Mr. President,

Since your State visit to Latvia in 2002, the economic relations between our two countries have also grown much closer and I hope that this trend continues. Latvia is greatly interested in strengthening its economic ties with Turkey, as evidenced by the delegation of Latvian entrepreneurs who are accompanying me during this visit to your dynamic country. I have no doubt that the Turkish-Latvian Business Council Meeting will open up avenues for new partnerships and will contribute considerably to strengthening the economic links between our countries.

Turkey and Latvia are linked by close ties of partnership and friendship, as well as by common goals for the future, which are geared to mutual cooperation, an increase in the welfare of our nations and an active participation in the spreading of peace and stability in the world. Already now, within the framework of the NATO alliance, the relationship between our countries has grown closer and provides us with the opportunity to create together the type of world that we would like to leave to future generations strong, united and determined in the face of future challenges. I am convinced that cooperation between Latvia and Turkey, based on a similar vision of the future, will continue to develop even more rapidly and will form a foundation for the realization of new and as yet unrealized opportunities.

Mr. President,

On behalf of my husband, Professor Imants Freibergs, and on my own personal behalf, permit me to wish you strength and energy in the fulfilment of your important duties for the good of the Republic of Turkey. I wish to raise this toast to you, Mr. President, and to you, Madame Sezer. To an even closer partnership between Latvia and Turkey for the future and welfare of our nations! To a united, secure and prosperous Europe!